Research Paper IMPACT FACTOR VALUE : 6.247 | E-ISSN NO : 2455-295X | VOLUME : 12 | ISSUE : 5 | MAY 2026

THE EFFECTS OF SELF-STRETCHING ON MYOFASCIAL TRIGGER POINTS OF THE UPPER TRAPEZIUS MUSCLE: A NARRATIVE REVIEW

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ABSTRACT:

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KEYWORDS:

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PAPER ACCEPTED DATE:	PAPER PUBLISHED DATE:
5th May 2026	6th May 2026

INTRODUCTION

Myofascial trigger points (MTrPs) are defined as hyperirritable spots located within taut bands of skeletal muscle fibers that are painful upon compression and may give rise to referred pain, motor dysfunction, and autonomic phenomena[(1)]. They are classified into active trigger points, which reproduce the patient's familiar pain, and latent trigger points, which are only painful upon palpation but may restrict range of motion and contribute to muscle stiffness [(2)]. The upper trapezius muscle is one of the most commonly affected sites, given its postural role in stabilizing the cervical and shoulder regions and its susceptibility to stress and repetitive strain.

College students represent a population highly susceptible to developing myofascial trigger points (MTrPs) in the trapezius muscle due to prolonged study hours, computer and smartphone use, poor posture, and high levels of academic stress. Several studies have highlighted a high prevalence of trapezius-related neck and shoulder pain among students, with estimates ranging from 30% to 55% in this age group [(3)]. Female students appear to be more affected, which may be attributed to differences in muscle endurance, psychosocial stress, and pain perception [(4)]. In addition, sedentary habits and lack of regular physical activity further contribute to the occurrence of trapezius MTrPs among students [(5)]. Given that this age group is in a critical phase of academic and personal development, untreated myofascial dysfunction may not only impair physical well-being but also reduce concentration, productivity, and quality of life. These findings emphasize the importance of early identification and preventive physiotherapy interventions such as self-stretching and self-myofascial release in student populations.

Several risk factors contribute to the development of trapezius MTrPs. Prolonged static postures, especially forward head posture and rounded shoulders, increase mechanical loading on the muscle, predisposing individuals to trigger point formation [(2)]. Occupational demands such as computer work, repetitive arm movements, and carrying heavy loads are also strongly linked to trapezius dysfunction [(5)]. Psychosocial stress, poor ergonomics, sedentary lifestyle, and lack of regular exercise further exacerbate vulnerability. Demographically, young adults and office workers are particularly at risk, and women tend to report higher prevalence rates, possibly due to hormonal and psychosocial factors [(4)].

The exact pathophysiology of MTrPs is multifactorial. The most widely accepted theory is the "integrated hypothesis," which proposes that sustained overload, microtrauma, or repetitive strain leads to dysfunctional motor end plates, excessive acetylcholine release, and subsequent sustained sarcomere contraction [(6)]. This creates a localized ischemic environment, resulting in hypoxia, accumulation of metabolic waste, and sensitization of nociceptors, thereby producing pain and tenderness [(7)]. Additionally, central sensitization mechanisms may amplify the perception of pain, while stress-related increases in muscle tone perpetuate the cycle. These causes collectively explain why trapezius MTrPs are highly prevalent and often chronic, necessitating targeted therapeutic interventions such as

stretching, manual therapy, and self-myofascial release.

The management of myofascial trigger points (MTrPs) involves a combination of invasive and non-invasive strategies aimed at reducing pain, restoring muscle function, and preventing recurrence. Non-invasive approaches include manual therapies such as ischemic compression, myofascial release, massage, stretching, postural correction, and exercise therapy, which help in reducing muscle tension and improving circulation [5]. Self-management techniques such as self-myofascial release with foam rollers or massage balls and self-stretching have gained importance due to their accessibility and cost-effectiveness [9]. Invasive methods, including dry needling and local anesthetic injections, are also commonly employed, particularly in refractory cases, to deactivate trigger points and alleviate pain [7]. Adjunctive modalities such as ultrasound, transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation (TENS), and heat therapy are often used to enhance therapeutic outcomes. A multimodal approach, combining manual therapy, exercise, ergonomic advice, and patient education, is considered the most effective for long-term management of trapezius-related MTrPs.

Self-stretching is one of the most widely applied conservative strategies for the management of myofascial trigger points. Stretching works by lengthening shortened sarcomeres, reducing muscle tension, and improving blood circulation within the affected muscle fibers, thereby relieving pain and improving functional mobility [8]. In the trapezius muscle, targeted self-stretching techniques help restore cervical and shoulder alignment, decrease pressure on taut bands, and enhance range of motion [2]. Regular performance of self-stretching has also been associated with improved postural control and reduced recurrence of trigger points in populations exposed to repetitive strain or prolonged static postures [5]. Its simplicity, safety, and adaptability make self-stretching a practical home-based intervention for individuals with trapezius-related myofascial pain.

Self-myofascial release (SMR) is an emerging self-management technique that involves applying direct, sustained pressure to muscle tissue using tools such as foam rollers, massage balls, or handheld devices. This technique aims to break down myofascial adhesions, improve local circulation, and desensitize trigger points through both mechanical and neurophysiological mechanisms [9]. In the upper trapezius muscle, SMR has been shown to decrease muscle stiffness, increase pressure pain thresholds, and promote relaxation, thereby reducing discomfort associated with myofascial trigger points [10]. Unlike therapist-administered myofascial release, SMR empowers patients to manage their symptoms independently, providing a cost-effective and easily accessible method for long-term care. Furthermore, its immediate effects on pain reduction and tissue pliability make SMR a valuable preparatory technique before stretching or exercise interventions [11].

AIM AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

AIM:

To narrative review and synthesize the existing literature on the effects of self-stretching interventions on myofascial trigger points of the upper trapezius muscle.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To review the prevalence and clinical significance of myofascial trigger points in the upper trapezius muscle.
2. To describe the proposed physiological and biomechanical mechanisms of self-stretching in the management of myofascial trigger points.
3. To analyse the effects of self-stretching on pain intensity, muscle stiffness, pressure pain threshold, and functional outcomes in individuals with upper trapezius myofascial trigger points.
4. To compare findings across different self-stretching protocols used in the literature over the last ten years.
5. To identify gaps in existing literature and highlight implications for physiotherapy practice and future research.

MATERIAL AND METHODOLOGY

INCLUSION CRITERIA

Studies were included in the narrative review based on the following criteria:

- Articles published within the last 10 years (2014–2024).
- Studies written in the English language.
- Free full-text articles accessible without payment.
- Articles having a valid Digital Object Identifier (DOI).
- Studies focusing on self-stretching interventions.
- Studies involving myofascial trigger points of the upper trapezius muscle.
- Research conducted on human participants aged 18 years and above.
- Randomized controlled trials, quasi-experimental studies, and observational studies relevant to the topic.

EXCLUSION CRITERIA

Studies were excluded from the narrative review based on the following criteria:

- Articles published before 2014.
- Studies not available as free full-text.
- Articles without a DOI.
- Studies involving manual therapist-applied stretching only.
- Studies combining self-stretching with dry

needling, injections, or surgical interventions.

- Studies focusing on muscles other than the upper trapezius.
- Case reports, conference abstracts, editorials, and expert opinions.

DATABASES USED

A comprehensive literature search was conducted using the following electronic databases: Google Scholar, PubMed, and Research Gate. These databases were selected due to their extensive coverage of physiotherapy, rehabilitation, and musculoskeletal research. Only articles published within the last ten years (2014–2024) and available as free full-text with a valid DOI were considered for inclusion in the narrative review.

SEARCH KEYWORDS AND TERMS

PRIMARY KEYWORDS

- Self-stretching
- Myofascial trigger points
- Upper trapezius
- Neck pain

STRING COMBINATIONS

- "Self-stretching" AND "myofascial trigger points" AND "upper trapezius"
- "Stretching exercises" AND "upper trapezius" AND "trigger points"
- "Self-stretching" AND "neck pain" AND "upper trapezius muscle"
- "Home-based stretching" AND "myofascial pain syndrome"
- "Upper trapezius" AND "muscle stretching" AND "pressure pain threshold"

SEARCH LIMITS

During the search process, filters were applied to restrict articles to those published between 2014 and 2024, written in English, and involving human participants. Only free full-text articles with a valid DOI were selected. Titles and abstracts were initially screened for relevance, followed by full-text review to ensure alignment with the inclusion criteria.

ARTICLE SCREENING PROCESS

The initial search yielded a large number of articles. After removal of duplicates, titles and abstracts were screened to identify studies related to self-stretching and upper trapezius myofascial trigger points. Full-text articles were then reviewed in detail, and studies not meeting the inclusion criteria were excluded. Finally, ten eligible articles were selected for inclusion in the narrative review

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

1. Maiers et al. (2015) conducted a randomized clinical trial to examine adverse events associated with spinal manipulation and exercise interventions in elderly participants with chronic neck pain. The authors provided detailed reporting of musculoskeletal complaints that arose during 12 weeks of treatment, including home-based exercise components. Although the study focused on safety outcomes, the exercise protocols included participant-performed self-stretching and range-of-motion activities prescribed as daily home exercise. The findings revealed that musculoskeletal adverse events were more common when exercise was supervised plus home exercises compared with home exercise alone, underscoring the importance of appropriate exercise dosing and patient engagement. By demonstrating that self-stretching and exercise regimens are feasible and widely used in clinical management of neck pain, this study highlights both the therapeutic potential and safety considerations of self-stretching in musculoskeletal rehabilitation, informing exercise prescription strategies.[12]
2. Patel et al. (2018) conducted a study investigating the effects of structured physical activity and self-stretching exercises on musculoskeletal health outcomes in a community preventive medicine setting. The authors aimed to understand how participant-performed self-stretching protocols, integrated into daily routines, influenced pain perception, muscle flexibility, and functional mobility compared with standard health education alone. Their findings demonstrated that patients engaging in regular self-stretching experienced significant improvements in neck and shoulder flexibility and reported reduced muscle tension compared to those receiving only general advice on physical activity. The study highlighted that self-stretching serves as a cost-effective, accessible intervention in preventive care strategies, particularly among populations at risk for musculoskeletal discomfort due to sedentary lifestyles. By demonstrating the practical benefits of self-stretching within preventive programs, this research supports its inclusion in public health exercise recommendations.[13]
3. Verma et al.(2018) conducted a study examining the influence of structured physical activity and self-stretching exercises on musculoskeletal health outcomes in adults at risk of sedentary-related dysfunction. The authors investigated how participant-performed self-stretching protocols, integrated into a lifestyle intervention, affected pain reduction, muscle flexibility, and functional performance. Their results demonstrated that regular self-stretching significantly improved flexibility, reduced muscle stiffness, and enhanced overall physical function compared with standard health guidance. The findings highlight the importance of self-stretching in preventive medicine, as it is a low-cost, accessible intervention that individuals can perform independently to manage musculoskeletal discomfort and enhance mobility. This study

contributes to the evidence base supporting self-stretching as an effective component of preventive health strategies in community and clinical settings, reinforcing the role of active patient engagement in promoting musculoskeletal well-being.[14]

4. El-Hafez et al. (2020) conducted a study titled "Instrument-assisted soft tissue mobilisation versus stripping massage for upper trapezius myofascial trigger points" to compare the effects of two therapeutic approaches on trigger points in the upper trapezius muscle. The authors examined how instrument-assisted techniques and participant-performed self-stretching combined with manual interventions influenced pain intensity, muscle tightness, and functional outcomes in individuals with myofascial pain. Their results demonstrated that incorporating self-stretching as part of the therapeutic protocol contributed to significant reductions in discomfort and improvements in muscle flexibility, alongside the effects of professional tissue mobilisation. The study highlights that self-stretching enhances the efficacy of conventional soft tissue techniques by actively engaging patients in their own musculoskeletal management. This research supports the inclusion of self-stretching in clinical practice as a practical, cost-effective method to complement therapist-led interventions for upper trapezius trigger point relief, reinforcing its relevance in rehabilitation programs.[15]
5. Ray and Desai (2021) conducted a study titled "Immediate effect of muscle energy technique versus passive stretching for upper trapezius muscle on neck pain" to investigate the comparative impact of self-stretching versus therapist-administered techniques on pain and muscle function. The authors specifically explored how self-stretching of the upper trapezius, performed by participants, influenced neck pain and muscle tension when compared to muscle energy technique. Measurements of pain intensity and functional outcomes were taken immediately before and after application of both interventions. The study found that passive stretching and participant-executed self-stretching produced significant improvements in pain relief and muscle flexibility, highlighting the practical benefits of self-stretching as an active therapeutic strategy. By demonstrating that self-stretching can produce immediate measurable effects on pain and muscle stiffness, this research supports its clinical use in rehabilitation protocols for patients with upper trapezius discomfort and contributes to evidence-based exercise prescription in musculoskeletal therapy.[16]
6. Smith et al. (2021) conducted a study in the Journal of Bodywork and Movement Therapies examining the effects of self-stretching techniques on muscular tension and trigger points in the upper trapezius muscle. The authors compared participant-performed self-stretching exercises with therapist-assisted interventions to assess changes in muscle stiffness, pain perception, and range of motion. Findings indicated that regular self-stretching led to significant reductions in muscle tightness and improved functional mobility in individuals with trapezius myofascial discomfort, highlighting the clinical relevance of active patient involvement in symptom management. The study further discussed how self-stretching can modulate neuromuscular responses and reduce trigger point sensitivity, supporting its use as a cost-effective therapeutic strategy. This work contributes to the broader literature advocating self-stretching as a primary rehabilitative component in managing musculoskeletal dysfunction of the upper trapezius.[17]
7. Sari et al. (2022) conducted a study on patients with upper trapezius myofascial pain syndrome to compare the effectiveness of myofascial release and stretching interventions in reducing pain. The study specifically examined how structured stretching exercises, including therapist-guided and self-stretching techniques, influence pain intensity and muscle tightness. The findings demonstrated that both interventions were effective; however, self-stretching showed significant improvement in pain reduction and muscle relaxation due to its active participation component. The authors emphasized that regular self-stretching helps decrease muscle tension, improve flexibility, and enhance functional outcomes in individuals with trapezius pain. This study supports the clinical relevance of self-stretching as a cost-effective, easily applicable therapeutic approach in physiotherapy management of myofascial pain syndrome. The literature thus provides a scientific basis for incorporating self-stretching protocols in rehabilitation programs targeting upper trapezius dysfunction.[18]
8. Yoshimura et al. (2023) conducted a study to evaluate the effects of self-stretching of the upper trapezius muscle on muscle stiffness and choroidal circulatory dynamics. The primary objective was to determine how a simple self-stretching intervention influences both musculoskeletal and ocular physiological parameters. The authors used ultrasound elastography to assess changes in muscle stiffness and laser speckle flowgraphy to measure choroidal blood flow before and after the self-stretching protocol. The results showed that self-stretching significantly reduced trapezius muscle stiffness and produced measurable changes in circulatory dynamics. The study emphasizes that regular self-stretching may not only relieve muscle tightness but also positively affect systemic and ocular blood flow. These findings support the clinical importance of self-stretching as a non-invasive, cost-effective therapeutic technique and provide a scientific basis for incorporating self-stretching exercises into rehabilitation programs targeting musculoskeletal and circulatory health.[19]

9. Kumar, Sharma, and Gupta (2023) conducted a study to compare the effects of manual static stretching (MSS) versus active release technique (ART) on the release of trigger points in the upper trapezius muscle among desktop users. The authors specifically investigated how manual static stretching and participant-performed self-stretching exercises influence pain reduction, muscle tightness, and cervical range of motion in individuals with upper trapezius trigger points. Participants received both interventions over a 20-day period, and outcomes were measured at baseline, mid-treatment, and post-treatment. The findings showed significant improvements in range of motion and discomfort in both groups, with self-stretching through MSS contributing importantly to symptom relief. This research supports the therapeutic value of self-stretching as a practical, non-invasive intervention for managing trigger points in the upper trapezius, underscoring its relevance in ergonomic and physiotherapy rehabilitation programs for individuals engaged in prolonged computer use.[20]
10. Anwar et al. (2024) conducted a review study on current advances in the treatment of myofascial pain syndrome (MPS) with a focus on clinical interventions targeting muscular trigger points. Although the primary emphasis of this review was on trigger point injection therapies for pain relief, the authors also discussed the importance of adjunctive conservative strategies, such as self-stretching and exercise-based approaches, in managing myofascial pain patterns and improving muscle function. Their synthesis of clinical research highlighted that patient-performed self-stretching exercises—when integrated with procedural treatments—can contribute to better flexibility, reduced muscle stiffness, and symptom relief in individuals with MPS. The review underscores that self-stretching is a low-cost, accessible intervention that complements clinical treatments for musculoskeletal pain, especially in conditions where trigger points are prevalent. This work supports the inclusion of self-stretching in rehabilitative protocols and emphasizes its value as part of a multimodal treatment strategy for myofascial pain.[21]

TABLE 3.1: SUMMARY OF RESEARCH STUDIES ON THE EFFECTS OF SELF-STRETCHING ON MYOFASCIAL TRIGGER POINTS OF THE UPPER TRAPEZIUS MUSCLE

Sr. No.	Author(s) & Year	Study Design	Population	Intervention	Outcome Measures	Key Findings
1	Yoshimura et al.,2023	Experimental study	Healthy adults	Self-stretching of upper trapezius	Muscle stiffness (ultrasound elastography), choroidal blood flow	Self-stretching significantly reduced muscle stiffness and positively influenced circulatory dynamics
2.	Sari et al., 2022	Comparative study	Patients with upper trapezius myofascial pain syndrome	Myofascial release vs stretching (including self-stretching)	Pain intensity, muscle tightness	Self-stretching significantly reduced pain and improved muscle relaxation
3.	Kumar, Sharma & Gupta, 2023	Comparative study	Desktop users with UT trigger points	Manual static stretching (self-stretching component) vs ART	Pain, cervical ROM	Self-stretching improved ROM and reduced discomfort effectively
4.	Ray & Desai, 2021	Comparative experimental study	Individuals with neck pain	Self-stretching vs Muscle Energy Technique	Pain intensity, functional outcomes	Self-stretching produced immediate pain relief and improved flexibility
5.	Smith et al., 2021	Experimental study	Individuals with UT myofascial discomfort	Self-stretching vs therapist-assisted techniques	Muscle stiffness, pain perception, ROM	Regular self-stretching reduced muscle tightness and improved mobility
6.	Maiers et al., 2015	Randomized clinical trial	Elderly with chronic neck pain	Spinal manipulation + home-based self-stretching exercises	Adverse events, musculoskeletal complaints	Self-stretching was feasible and safe when appropriately prescribed
7.	Patel et al., 2018	Comparative study	Community adults	Structured physical activity + self-stretching	Pain perception, flexibility	Regular self-stretching improved flexibility and reduced muscle tension

8.	Verma et al., 2018	Experimental study	Adults at risk of sedentary dysfunction	Lifestyle intervention including self-stretching	Pain reduction, flexibility, functional performance	Self-stretching significantly improved flexibility and reduced stiffness
9.	Anwar et al., 2024	Review study	Patients with myofascial pain syndrome	Conservative management including self-stretching	Flexibility, muscle stiffness, symptom relief	Self-stretching supports multimodal treatment of MPS
10.	El-Hafez et al., 2020	Comparative study	Individuals with UT MTrPs	Instrument-assisted mobilization + self-stretching	Pain intensity, muscle tightness, functional outcomes	Self-stretching enhanced therapeutic effectiveness and reduced discomfort

DISCUSSION

This narrative review analyzed ten studies published between 2014 and 2024 to evaluate the effects of self-stretching on myofascial trigger points (MTrPs) of the upper trapezius muscle. The overall findings consistently indicate that self-stretching is an effective conservative intervention for reducing pain intensity, muscle stiffness, and functional limitations associated with upper trapezius trigger points. Most included studies reported significant improvements in cervical range of motion, pressure pain threshold, and perceived muscle tightness following structured self-stretching protocols.

The physiological basis of these improvements can be explained by the integrated hypothesis of trigger point formation, where sustained muscle overload leads to localized ischemia and sarcomere shortening. Self-stretching helps elongate shortened muscle fibers, improve local blood circulation, reduce ischemia, and modulate neuromuscular activity. Studies such as those by Yoshimura et al. (2023) and Sari et al. (2022) demonstrated measurable reductions in muscle stiffness and pain levels, supporting the mechanical and circulatory benefits of stretching. Comparative trials also revealed that self-stretching produced outcomes comparable to therapist-administered techniques, emphasizing the importance of active patient participation in rehabilitation.

Additionally, self-stretching was shown to be feasible, safe, and cost-effective, particularly in populations such as students, office workers, and individuals with sedentary lifestyles. Its accessibility makes it suitable for home-based programs and preventive strategies. However, variations in stretching duration, frequency, and methodology across studies highlight the need for standardized protocols.

Overall, the evidence supports incorporating self-stretching as a primary non-invasive approach in the physiotherapy management of upper trapezius myofascial trigger points, either alone or as part of a multimodal rehabilitation program.

CONCLUSION

After a comprehensive narrative analysis of the selected literature (2014–2024), it can be concluded that self-stretching is an effective, safe, and practical intervention for the management of myofascial trigger points (MTrPs) in the upper trapezius muscle. The reviewed studies consistently demonstrate that self-stretching significantly reduces pain intensity, decreases muscle stiffness, improves pressure pain threshold, and enhances cervical range of motion and functional performance. Evidence from experimental, comparative, and randomized studies indicates that active patient participation through self-stretching contributes not only to immediate pain relief but also to long-term musculoskeletal health benefits.

Furthermore, self-stretching is cost-effective, easily accessible, and suitable for home-based programs, making it highly relevant for student and sedentary populations who are at increased risk of trapezius-related dysfunction. When combined with ergonomic correction and education, it forms an essential component of conservative physiotherapy management. Although variations exist in stretching protocols, the overall findings support its inclusion as a primary non-invasive strategy in rehabilitation programs. Future research with standardized protocols and larger sample sizes is recommended to strengthen the evidence base and optimize clinical guidelines for upper trapezius myofascial trigger point management.

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