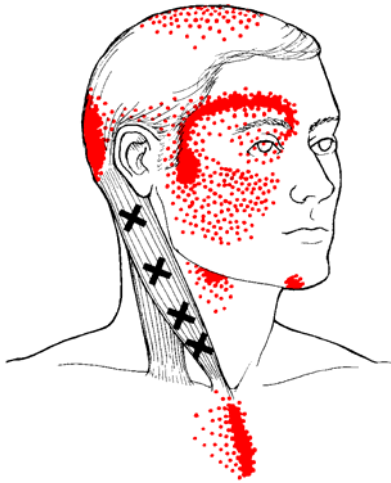




Referred Pain: The Great Mimic

by Douglas Nelson



One of the most common assumptions about the sensation of pain is that it is a warning sign protect us from doing further damage. While this can be true of certain types of acute pain, it is often not true of many other kinds of pain, especially referred pain and chronic pain. This can create much confusion and frustration for the pain sufferer and also for the health-care provider.

If we assume that pain is a warning, as with all warning systems, we need to be assured that the warning is both location-specific and timely. If a call came warning you of a break-in at your office, only to find out later it was actually at your house, you'd probably be looking for a different security company.

This is exactly what happens in referred pain. Referred pain means that where the sensation is felt is not where the problem originated. In the drawing, the dots represent pain about the face and head. Notice the pattern of dots above the eye; this is the classic migraine arc. While this pain pattern will mimic a migraine almost perfectly, it is not a migraine and migraine treatments will not help.

The origin of the “migraine” pain is at one of the X’s located in a muscle in the front of the neck. When pressed upon, the irritated spot refers pain in an arc pattern above the eye. Press the spot (called a trigger point) and it recreates your headache. Release the trigger point with careful treatment and the headaches disappear. The relationship between the trigger point the headache is very clear and easy to confirm.

Scientists are just beginning to explore the reasons for referred pain. Essentially, the brain gets confused about the source of sensation and sends signals down multiple pathways in response. While internal organ referral (gallbladder inflammation that refers to the right shoulder / angina that refers to the jaw or down the a left arm) has been well known for many decades, muscular referral patterns came to light in the 1950’s and are still being researched.

If the source of your pain is confusing to you and your doctor, remember that trigger points are great mimics and might be fooling you too.