

Douglas Niedt's

GUITAR TECHNIQUE

TIP OF THE MONTH

Marsha to Doug: "You need a bath." Hand Contrast Baths

By Douglas Niedt

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I hate to say it, but we are seeing the graying of the guitar world. Lots of people began playing the guitar in the 1960's and have stayed with it these many years or picked it up again after a hiatus of several years. I don't know the numbers on the guitar world overall, but I do know that the demographics of several major guitar magazines (steel string and nylon string) show that more than 90% of their readership is past forty years of age. Unfortunately, along with those years of wisdom and experience come aches and pains of many kinds. For musicians, and musicians of ALL ages for that matter, hand problems are very common. There are now doctors and therapists around the country who specialize in musicians' hand problems. Websites on the topic abound. Google "musicians hand problems" and you will see what I mean. This is a column about guitar technique, and often in our diligent efforts to improve our technique, we don't warm up properly, don't practice correctly, or use our bodies in inefficient ways. The result is often pain.

The Problem

One of the most common hand injuries for guitarists is tendonitis, an inflammation of one or more tendons, usually in the left hand (the correct spelling used to be "tendinitis" but now "tendonitis" seems to be used more). Personally, I have rarely had hand problems, but at one time came down with tendonitis in my left thumb. I stretched, took Ibuprofen, and decreased practice on some things I thought were irritating the tendons. But the tendonitis kept hanging on.

How To Fix It

One of my students told me he had gone to a great hand therapist who worked wonders in just two or three visits for a much more serious problem he had. So I made an appointment to see his therapist, Marsha Lawrence of *Handworx* here in Kansas City.

To make a fairly short story shorter, after examining me and watching me play, Marsha said, "Doug, you need to take a bath." Now I want to assure my readers I do not have any kind of personal hygiene problem. What she was referring to is the **Contrast Bath or Contrast Bath Hydrotherapy**. Hydrotherapy is the use of water as a therapeutic agent. Water may be applied to an injury in the form of ice, heat, etc. The specific type of hydrotherapy discussed here is called **Contrast Baths**. Here is the procedure as outlined by Handworx:

Contrast Baths

1. Alternating between warm and cold water has been found to be helpful for decreasing symptoms often seen with overuse syndrome.
2. Heat increases circulation and the ability of tissue to stretch making it easier for the nerves and tendons to glide.
3. Cold helps decrease pain.

SET UP: This works well at a double kitchen sink. You can also use the sink and one pan on the counter.

Fill one sink with warm water. (105°-110°)

Fill the other with cold water. (59°-68°)

1. Soak your hand in the warm water for 10 minutes.
2. Place your hand in the cold water for 1 minute.
3. Return to warm water for 4 minutes.
4. Return to cold water for 1 minute.
5. End with at least 4 minutes of warm water.

A minimum of twice per day is recommended, but 3-5 times a day is optimal.

(End Handworx Recommendations)

Some specialists say to end with cold water--I'm thinking that maybe if you are ending your practice session, you should end with cold water. But if you are going INTO your practice session, end with warm.

Nicholas Quarrier, (MHS PT, OC) on the Performing Arts Medicine at Ithaca College website explains, "The contrast of hot-cold creates a pumping of the blood in and out of the body part. The blood vessels dilate in the heat and constrict in the cold. Any stagnating swelling is reduced as it is pumped out of the body part. Inflammation is reduced as fresh blood and healing agents are pumped into the injured area. Pain is also reduced, as both hot and cold have anesthetic effects. Contrast baths are effective in helping carpal tunnel syndromes and hand / forearm tendinitis."

The bottom line is that for me, this treatment gave immediate relief. Complete recovery took about three to four weeks. As Mr. Quarrier explains, "Here is a home remedy for many hand, wrist, and forearm aches and pains. If you suffer from what you believe to be an overuse injury during music playing, you may want to try a home hydrotherapy treatment. This is not a substitute for seeking medical attention for any suspected serious injury. I know many musicians suffer from music-related soreness and are unable to get immediate attention from a physician. In the meantime, hydrotherapy is an effective treatment that reduces or eliminates many symptoms and signs of overuse injuries."

Next time you start to have twinges of pain, try this out before the pain develops into something serious. There is no expense, it's easy, and it works. And while you're soaking your hand, get some reading in, or do some mental practice for your music memorization ([How to Never Ever Forget a Piece of Music Again](#)).

Don't wait till Saturday night. Take a bath—now.