

Focal Dystonia

Focal dystonia is a relatively rare condition in the general population but can have a particularly harmful effect on an accomplished musician. Focal dystonia is a condition characterized by painless involuntary contractions that occur during a certain activity, such as performing or practicing. Approximately 1% of professional musicians develop focal dystonia and the effects can be debilitating. An example of famous musicians that have had this condition include Billy McLaughlin and Liona Boyd, who are guitarists, and pianists, Leon Fisher and Gary Graffman.

We really do not know the exact cause of focal dystonia but there are theories that explain it. Researchers think that there is a genetic predisposition and individual behaviors that can affect it. People who engage in skillful, repetitive activity across the span of years, such as musicians, are set up to develop this condition. Researchers have recognized that there are at least 13 genes or chromosomal locations that have been connected to this condition. We are uncertain who will develop this particular problem, so we recommend a number of preventive measures listed below:

- a) Never push through fatigue or injury.
- b) Only increase performing or practice times in stages, no more than 10-20 percent per week. Let go of “perfectionism” and take the slow and steady course.
- c) Acclimate gradually to any unfamiliar instrument.
- d) Initiate technical changes in increments.
- e) Curb new hand intensive or repetitive tasks.
- f) Commit to healthy practice habits. Minimize stress intention. It is better to take short, frequent breaks than to engage in long practice sessions.

Other medical problems can mimic this condition so it is important that if you start to experience some of the symptoms described above that you get it checked out.