

If you're a touring musician or a gigging player, the question of whether to **switch shoulders during soundcheck** when your strap starts hurting isn't just a minor consideration—it can affect your entire performance and your body's health down the line. Strap imbalance is one of those silent saboteurs lurking behind the scenes, often leading to neck and upper back pain that people just assume is “part of the job.” But after nine years spent running venue load-ins and watching countless touring crews work hard—often too hard—I'm here to shed some light on why this happens, what causes it, and practical strategies to protect yourself, from kinesiology tape to smart load-in habits.

Understanding the Causes: Load-In Injuries and Safe Lifting

Every day on tour starts long before the band hits the stage. The load-in is where many of us first put our bodies at risk. Even before your strap hurts, improper lifting or carrying a heavy amp can cause subtle postural shifts that exacerbate the discomfort from your instrument's strap. Many players don't realize that what they do off stage directly impacts how they feel on it.

- **Heavy gear:** Amplifiers and cases can weigh upward of 50-100 pounds, and careless handling puts strain on your back, shoulders, and neck.
- **Unsafe lifting:** It's not macho to grunt and throw your back out. Use safe lifting techniques—bend your knees, keep gear close, avoid twisting.
- **Bad posture:** Hunching over your gear or slumping when resting between songs tightens muscles and worsens *strap imbalance*.

Tip: Carry a small lacrosse ball in your gear bag. It's a fantastic tool to self-massage those knots that develop from tension—especially in your upper traps and rhomboids where strap pain commonly localizes.

Why Strap Imbalance Develops: Instrument-Specific Repetitive Strain

Putting on your strap and playing may sound straightforward, but it can create a lot of uneven torque on your body. Most players naturally favor one shoulder, which leads to chronic imbalance.



1. Musicians with heavy instruments like bass guitars and mandolins suffer more strain than acoustic guitarists.

2. Straps that aren't adequately padded increase pressure points, especially around the shoulder joint.
3. Poorly adjusted straps pinch nerves and affect circulation, creating neck and upper back pain.
4. Repetitive motions amplify muscle fatigue, leading to microtrauma and inflammation.

To address these issues, kinesiology tape is a commonly recommended solution. Applying kinesiology tape around the shoulder and upper back area can provide proprioceptive feedback, helping to keep your posture aligned and reduce painful tugging where the strap contacts your muscles.

Van Travel Stiffness and The Importance of Circulation

After load-in but before soundcheck, you might be trapped in a cramped van seat, which leads to stiffness and reduced circulation—key contributors to strap pain. The collective effect of van travel stiffness plus strap imbalance primes your body for discomfort during soundcheck.

- Seats with poor lumbar support don't help; many venues I know even have broken elevators, so you're forced to climb stairs carrying gear, compounding fatigue.
- Sitting for long stretches tightens hip flexors and impairs blood flow to your legs and hips, which affects the entire kinetic chain.
- Make sure to hydrate consistently—skipping water is a rookie mistake and worsens muscle cramps and fatigue.

Stretching during breaks is ideal, and simple leg and hip mobility exercises can get your circulation back on track.

Sleep Debt, Adrenaline Timing, and Performance Fatigue

Adrenaline often masks pain during soundcheck or performance, but it's no substitute for proper rest. In fact, *sleep debt*—the cumulative effect of missed sleep across tour—dramatically reduces your pain threshold and prolongs recovery.

Many musicians mistakenly believe they can “push through” the discomfort until the adrenaline wears off, but this macho mindset leads to chronic injury. Instead, plan your day to optimize your circadian rhythm and recovery periods to minimize stress on your body.

So: Should I Switch Shoulders During Soundcheck?

Here is where practice meets practicality. The short answer: yes, switching shoulders during soundcheck when your strap hurts can provide immediate relief and help prevent lasting injury. But it's not a <https://equatemagazine.com/what-a-tour-actually-does-to-a-musicians-body/> silver bullet and needs to be combined with other strategies.

Benefits of Switching Shoulders

- **Reduces localized pressure:** Giving your dominant shoulder a break alleviates pinching and muscle fatigue.
- **Promotes balanced muscle engagement:** Prevents one side becoming stronger or tighter than the other, which leads to posture issues.
- **Improves circulation:** Switching shoulders shakes up your body's habitual tension patterns.

Shoulder Benefits Potential Challenges Dominant Shoulder Better technique control, familiar grip Overuse, soreness, and inflammation buildup Non-Dominant Shoulder Muscle balance, pain relief May feel awkward, need

How to Switch Shoulders Safely

1. Adjust your strap length carefully to maintain ergonomic positioning.
2. Use kinesiology tape to support muscles around the shoulder on the newly loaded side.
3. Warm up your shoulder and back muscles before switching to reduce strain.
4. Practice switching shoulders during rehearsals, not just cold during soundcheck.

Additional Tips for Preventing Strap Imbalance and Neck/Upper Back Pain

- **Invest in quality straps:** Look for wide, padded straps that evenly distribute weight.
- **Stay hydrated:** Companies like Joy Organics emphasize overall wellness including hydration; proper water intake is key to muscle function.
- **Use self-care tools:** A lacrosse ball to roll out knots and kinesiology tape for support can be lifesavers.
- **Prioritize sleep:** Schedule rest around your gigs to avoid sleep debt buildup.
- **Warm up and stretch:** Don't overlook gentle mobility stretches during load-in and before playing.
- **Manage adrenaline:** Recognize when adrenaline is masking pain and respect your body's limits afterward.

Final Thoughts

Touring musicians often battle through discomfort while dealing with the physical grind of soundchecks, van rides, and load-ins. Switching your strap to the other shoulder during soundcheck can definitely help reduce *neck and upper back pain* and help balance muscle use, but it's most effective as part of a broader injury-prevention routine.

From respecting safe lifting techniques during load-in and staying hydrated with mindful partners like Joy Organics, to using kinesiology tape and lacrosse balls for muscle support and recovery—the modern touring musician needs a toolkit beyond just road stories and "push through" advice.

Remember, ignoring the subtle warning signs like strap imbalance can lead to chronic injuries, missed shows, and lots of pain that's harder to fix than you think.



Next time your strap hurts during soundcheck, don't see it as a nuisance—see it as your body telling you to act smarter. Switch shoulders, use your tools, hydrate, and protect your body like the hardworking instrument it is.