

If you've spent any time touring or playing long sets, you know that shoulder pain from your guitar strap can hit hard—and fast. This isn't just about discomfort; chronic shoulder issues can lead to serious injuries that derail your shows and even your career. After nine years working closely with touring bands, load-ins, and backstage hustle, I've seen firsthand how this pain starts and, more importantly, how to stop it before it stops you.

Why Does Guitar Strap Shoulder Pain Happen?

Guitarists often blame their straps or their technique, but the real culprits are a mix of repetitive strain, poor load management during load-ins, and the brutal posture realities of touring life. Here's the breakdown:

- **Instrument-Specific Repetitive Strain:** Holding a guitar or bass against your body and keeping it in playing position uses a ton of shoulder and upper back muscle stabilization. Over time, this causes tightness and knots in the shoulder—especially if your strap isn't wide or padded enough.
- **Load-In Injuries and Unsafe Lifting:** You're not just playing; you're lifting amps, crates, and gear—even a small slip or bad lifting position during load-in can create upper back imbalances that worsen strap pain.
- **Van Travel Stiffness and Circulation:** Long hours cramped in a van or bus wreak havoc on your circulation, stiffening muscles and joints. That stiffness makes your shoulder and upper back more prone to strain when you finally stand and play.
- **Sleep Debt and Adrenaline Timing:** Touring sleep is often fragmented and insufficient, impairing muscle recovery and increasing pain sensitivity. Meanwhile, adrenaline masks pain during performances, but once it fades, the pain hits hard.

Step 1: Upgrade Your Gear — Wider Padded Guitar Straps Make a Huge Difference

One common cause of the infamous "strap shoulder knot" is narrow or thin straps digging into your shoulder muscles. If you've been using a worn-out strap from who-knows-when, it's time to invest. A wider padded guitar strap distributes the weight more evenly, reducing pressure on a single spot. Look for straps with thick padding and adjustable width to fit your body comfortably.

Pro tip: Don't just grab any strap off Amazon—test it on your shoulder in a crowded venue or during a soundcheck to ensure it doesn't slip and it stays comfortable over hours.



Step 2: Use Kinesiology Tape for Support and Pain Relief

Kinesiology tape is a simple, lightweight tool that can make a surprisingly big difference when applied correctly. It supports the muscles around your shoulder, increasing circulation and easing strain on those tight areas.

If you're new to tape, look for tutorials on how to place strips from your collarbone, equatemagazine.com over the trapezius muscle, and under your shoulder blade. The tape can reduce that nagging shoulder knot, making you more comfortable both during and after shows.

Step 3: Self-Massage With a Lacrosse Ball to Loosen Upper Back Imbalance

An often overlooked cause of strap shoulder pain is an upper back imbalance where one side tightens more than the other due to repetitive playing motions and uneven load-carrying on tour. Using a lacrosse ball against a wall or floor targets those knots precisely.

1. Place the ball on the upper trapezius muscle (where you feel the strap shoulder knot).
2. Lean your body weight into the ball and gently roll it around tight spots.
3. Hold pressure on tender areas for 20-30 seconds, then move slowly to other spots.

This simple routine after load-ins, long van rides, or gigs can reset your muscles and improve mobility.

Step 4: Practice Safe Lifting During Load-Ins to Prevent Shoulder Injury

Load-ins and load-outs are often overlooked sources of upper back and shoulder pain. I've run into too many bands nursing injuries from lifted amps or awkwardly hoisted flight cases.

- Always bend at the knees, not the waist.
- Keep loads close to your body to minimize strain.

- Communicate with your crew so you're not twisting or jerking.
- Use dollies and carts whenever possible—don't be the hero who "pushes through" pain.

Preventing injury in the first place means less time battling strap shoulder pain.

Step 5: Manage Van Travel Stiffness — Keep Moving and Hydrated

Hours spent cramped in a van or tour bus are brutal on your shoulder and upper back muscles. Circulation slows, muscles stiffen, and posture worsens. Here's what I recommend:

- **Stretch and move:** Every hour or so, stand up (if possible) and do simple shoulder rolls, neck stretches, and back twists.
- **Hydrate:** Skipping water on tour is a rookie mistake. Dehydration increases muscle cramps and stiffness. I always recommend supplementing with CBD tinctures like those from **Joy Organics** for natural muscle relaxation and recovery support.
- **Adjust your seat:** If the van has adjustable seats, reposition to reduce pressure on your upper back and shoulders.

Step 6: Prioritize Sleep and Manage Your Adrenaline Crash

The adrenaline from playing live can mask early warning signs of shoulder pain, but once the show is over, that pain surfaces with a vengeance. Sleep debt adds insult to injury, slowing muscle repair and increasing inflammation.

Try to:



- Schedule consistent sleep windows—even short naps help.
- Use calming routines and natural supplements (hello again **Joy Organics** CBD) to improve rest quality.
- Recognize when your body is signaling for rest versus when adrenaline is temporarily masking pain.

Summary Table: Common Causes and Solutions for Guitar Strap Shoulder Pain

Cause Effect Solution Thin/narrow guitar strap Pressure point and strap shoulder knot Use wider padded guitar strap Unsafe lifting during load-in Upper back imbalance and muscle strain Practice proper lifting technique and use gear carts Repetitive strain from playing Muscle tightness and pain Kinesiology tape and lacrosse ball self-massage Van travel stiffness Poor circulation and tight shoulders Stretch regularly and stay hydrated with supplements Sleep debt and adrenaline crash Pain hypersensitivity and poor muscle recovery Prioritize sleep and use natural recovery aids

Closing Thoughts

Shoulder pain from your guitar strap isn't just "part of the job." It's a warning sign that your body needs some serious care and smarter touring habits. Avoid macho "push through it" advice and start using today's tools—wider padded straps, kinesiology tape, lacrosse balls, and natural supplements like those from **Joy Organics**—to preserve your muscles and keep your playing pain-free.

Remember: touring is manual labor, not a party. Respect your body, respect your craft, and those long runs with your guitar strap won't have to hurt anymore.