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TAKE THE PAIN OUT OF GOING MOBILE

Canadian Physiotherapy Association offers advice to prevent injury from mobile technology

The 21st century has redefined the traditional physical concept of ‘the office’. Canadians now work anywhere, using wireless technology like laptops, cell phones and personal organisers. At the airport, on the road and in the field, more and more Canadians are ‘going mobile’. Unfortunately, few consider the serious effects this can have on their bodies.

“I am seeing more and more clients suffering from pain that results from working directly at their laptops,” says **Carolyn James**, a physiotherapist who focuses on ergonomics in her clinic Health at Work. “The long periods people spend working without taking breaks, sitting with their heads bent forward and shoulders hunched often triggers pain from the neck and shoulders to the wrists and hands.”

Musculoskeletal disorders are one of the most common causes of severe long-term pain and physical disability, and are considered one of the biggest health problems facing mobile workers today. Statistics show that an increasing number of wireless technology users experience ongoing aches and pains from using their laptop for long periods of time or from overuse of handheld wireless devices.

Members of the **Canadian Physiotherapy Association** are concerned that this could increase the numbers of repetitive strain injuries (RSI) and other soft tissue injuries as people spend more and more time punching a keypad or slouching over their laptop. “Many individuals discount the discomfort that they feel until they are experiencing full blown symptoms of RSI” says James “by then the problem is much more difficult to resolve”.

RSI is one of today’s major occupational hazards, affecting approximately 2.3 million Canadians¹ annually. Many of these injuries can be prevented with improved work habits and posture (ergonomics).

Ergonomics is an applied science directed at the design and arrangement of work tools and equipment to ensure products and environments are comfortable, safe and efficient for people to use. Physiotherapists have the knowledge and skills to advise on modifications to the work environment as well as giving guidance on improving work habits and postures. Specific strengthening and stretching exercises, combined with aerobic conditioning, may be part of the prescription to prevent recurrence of RSI.

Prevention and early intervention are the preferred approaches to managing RSI. Simple changes such as adding an external keyboard or mouse, and raising the monitor screen, will allow you to adopt a healthier working posture. More information on RSI can be found at the **Canadian Physiotherapy Association’s** web site at www.physiotherapy.ca/information sheets.htm.

¹ Statistics Canada, August 2003



LAPTOPS

Laptop computers are the backbone of most mobile offices today, both for those in the workforce and for many students at school. However, they defy the ergonomic principle of allowing for optimal posture for musculoskeletal health, and laptop users who spend hours on end typing text will have likely suffered the consequential sore shoulders and tight neck. For example, if you're working with elbows at the recommended 90-degree angle, the laptop's screen position will require that you bend your neck forward to view it, which puts excessive loading through the joint of your neck. But if you raise the laptop to eye level, then you are typing an awkward angle that can put strain through wrists and elbow joints.

While extended computer usage of any kind can be hard on your body, prolonged laptop use can be especially hard on the user. Physiotherapists recommend using key commands and shortcuts whenever possible, buying laptops equipped with adjustable height screens, and using an external keyboard when typing for extended periods. **Here are some simple, but effective tips from the Canadian Physiotherapy Association:**

- Make frequent postural changes and take breaks;
- Remove unnecessary supplies from carrying case such as drivers, batteries, and cables;
- Select a carrying case with wheels or backpack style. If these options do not work for you try periodically alternate carrying on the left and right shoulders or hands;
- Use a docking station, external keyboard, and pointing device whenever possible;
- Be creative – try using items around you to optimize your setup. For example, use your portable computer on top of the carrying case to raise the monitor to eye level or use a three-ring notebook to incline/decline to a better angle. This is especially effective when using an external keyboard;
- Try alternating from your lap to a desk every 30 minutes; and
- Choose accessories such as folding or mini keyboards, document holders, lap trays, wireless or retractable cord pointing devices, and task lights.

CELL PHONES AND TEXT MESSAGING

People are often surprised to learn that their shoulder and neck pain might be related to their phone use. A new syndrome, aptly named “cellular phone neck,” is now recognized as a disorder caused by cradling the telephone between your head and a hunched shoulder in order to use your hands to type, drink coffee, or turn a steering wheel. This is a proven path to shoulder pain.

Current global estimates reveal that the cell phone subscriber base is more than one billion worldwide. Canada and the US have the third highest number of cell phone users. Poor usage habits can lead to discomfort, but simple tips like alternating ears for each call, or storing commonly used numbers in your phone's memory can help.

The best solution is to use a hands-free headset that will free up your hands and let you keep your neck in an upright (and neutral) position. Studies show that upper back, neck and shoulder discomfort can be reduced up to 41% with the use of headsets, according to a Santa Clara Valley Medical Study in the US.

Canada has seen a 300 percent increase in text messaging in the past two years, and with over one million text messages expected to be sent this year, some see a potential strain on thumb muscles and tendons.

According to HealthyComputing.com, as the popularity of text messaging continues to soar, a new form of RSI has been identified as Text Message Injury, or TMI, caused by excessive use of the thumb to type text messages into a cell phone or PDA. This can happen when users are making hundreds of tiny repeated movements as they use the cell phone keypad.

With any type of repetitive activity like gaming or texting, the risk of injury to the tendons is increased. The **Canadian Physiotherapy Association** advises users to be aware of their posture, limit text time to short bouts of less than 15 minutes and keep muscles long and strong. Maintaining good alignment in the head, neck, and arms while texting, along with stretching before and afterwards can go a long way to reducing the risk of injury.

Physiotherapists are primary care, client-centred healthcare professionals skilled in evaluating, maintaining and restoring optimal physical function. They can provide education to help prevent RSI and provide treatment to help relieve symptoms that have already developed. A key component to an effective treatment plan is to identify and then alter or eliminate the situations that contributed to the onset of RSI.

The Canadian Physiotherapy Association is the voluntary organization representing more than 10,000 members and students across the country. CPA's mission is to provide leadership and direction to the physiotherapy profession, foster excellence in practice, education and research and promote high standards of health in Canada.

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