

Beware text neck from too much gadget use

Hunching over devices to watch videos, text, type causing 'global epidemic' of neck, shoulder strain, some say

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First, too much texting caused some people to come down with painful Blackberry Thumb. Now today's technology is being blamed for another malady: text neck.

Doctors and chiropractors say people hunched over their mobile gadgets are developing neck strain, headaches and pain in the shoulders and, sometimes, in arms and hands. What's more, all that curving of the body to text, type, watch videos and play games could cause debilitating pain that lasts a lifetime, they warn.

"This is a global epidemic," says Dean L. Fishman, a chiropractor who practices at the Text Neck Institute in Fort Lauderdale, Fla. He trademarked Text Neck and changed the name of his practice after noticing 90 percent of his patients coming in with the same complaint. His youngest patient is a 3-year-old, who's in love with playing games on an electronic device.

"It's starting younger and younger. There are more than six billion phones connected, and that's not counting the Kindles, iPads, tablets and all these devices we rely on daily," Fishman says. "Go outside, to a restaurant, the supermarket, a gym, the airport and notice the posture of almost everyone around you. You will see this everywhere, and now multiply that by every city in the world."

American sent 110 billion text messages in December 2008, the U.S. Census Bureau reported, and that number can only be increasing.

Fishman says text neck is actually not a new condition, but it's getting more attention because so many people are suffering from it. Doctors used to call it forward head posture, but Fishman noticed his patients better understood what he was talking about when he used the term text neck.

Richard Wells, professor of applied sciences at the University of Waterloo, in Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, wondered about the effects of technology on our bodies and conducted what is believed to be the world's first research study on text neck.

He found that among 140 students who participated in an online survey, twice as many experienced pain in their shoulders, neck and other areas when they used their devices three hours or more a day compared to those who used their devices for less time. The study was published in the January 2011 edition in the Journal of Applied Ergonomics.

“We learned the longer people use mobile devices, cell phones, PDAs — all the things we use to communicate with that have little keyboards — the more they have pain in their necks, shoulders and thumbs,” he says.

Texas chiropractor Cynthia Vaughn and spokesperson for the American Chiropractic Association says text neck is affecting tens of thousands of people here in the United States because nearly everyone has a cell phone. “It’s a known phenomenon and that’s increasing and doctors need to educate their patients on the proper ergonomics of this.”

Preventing text neck

Learning to hold your arms out and look straight ahead may initially seem awkward, but it can save your neck and spine, she says. Taking frequent breaks every 15 minutes and holding your head back also helps alleviate symptoms. The American Chiropractic Association also warns people to tuck their chins down to their chest, if you must look down rather than holding your arms out. Stretch your hands; squeeze a stress ball and stretch your chest by standing up straight with arms down at your side. Turn your forearms until your thumbs are pointing at the wall behind you.

“I tell my patients the easiest thing to do is pick up the phone and call people,” Vaughn says. “Phones still call out. If you’re not going to call people, take the time to drop your head back every few minutes.”

For those who already have neck and shoulder pain, Fishman says his patients have found relief by coming in for adjustments. Chiropractors and orthopedic specialists most often treat the issue.

Fishman also created a new Android app, called Text Neck, which gives users a green light when they are properly holding their phones and a red light when they are holding their heads down and rounding their shoulders. The application also can send reports to parents who can monitor their children’s posture while using their phones.

“We teach our patients to pull the shoulder blades back and down,” he says. “In our research, we found the people who made the most improvement in the restoration in the curve of their neck came from people who made the biggest change and stopped hanging down low.”