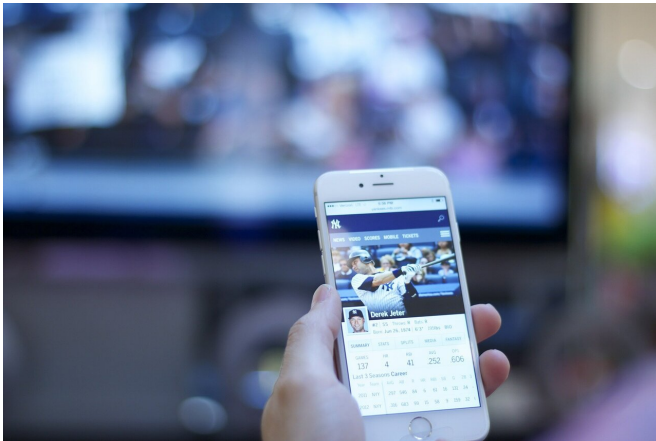


'Swiper's thumb?' Explore some common tech-related injuries

13 February 2020



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Nearly half of all U.S. adults say they can't live without their smartphones, according to the Pew Research Center. But what happens when our fondness for the latest electronic gadgets creates more pain than gain?

So-called tech-related injuries are on the rise. From "swiper's thumb," "text neck" or even "selfie elbow," these [health conditions](#) share one commonality: they occur when people use electronic devices too often or use them the wrong way. "When people position their hand, arm or neck in uncomfortable positions for a prolonged period of time, it can lead to strains and overuse injuries," said Dr. Michael Darowish, an orthopedic surgeon at Penn State Health Milton S. Hershey Medical Center.

Darowish, who co-authored a [2009 article](#) on "cellphone elbow," says many of these conditions have actually been around for years—long before the iPhone 11 arrived. The good news: "Most can be solved by listening to your body and improving your posture," said neurosurgeon Dr. Gregory Thompson at Penn State Health St. Joseph.

Let's explore three common types of conditions:

Overuse injuries

This can include "swiper's thumb" and "iPad hand." They're almost all a type of tendonitis. "Often, we find it's De Quervain's tenosynovitis, an inflammation of the tendons that abduct the thumb," Darowish said. "Pregnant women and parents who often lift their young kids are prone to it, too," Darowish added.

Tendonitis also may appear in the fingers or wrists. Pain while texting, aching and soreness are [mild symptoms](#).

Rest, anti-inflammatory medications (such as Naprosyn or ibuprofen) and activity modifications can ease the pain. Severe cases may require cortisone injections, bracing or even surgery to calm the inflamed tendons.

Nerve issues

"Cellphone elbow" is likely cubital tunnel syndrome, irritation of the ulnar nerve that runs from the elbow to the small finger. Common symptoms include numbness in the ring and small fingers and needing to shake out the hand. More [severe symptoms](#) include clumsiness and dropping things. Similarly, [carpal tunnel syndrome](#) can be aggravated with improper ergonomics or overuse, causing numbness in the thumb, index, and middle fingers.

In most cases, changing ergonomics will ease the symptoms. Ask: Am I sitting too close to the computer? Are my wrists too flexed or extended? Holding my smartphone for too long? Leaning my elbows on the arms of my chair while typing? "If I'm on my iPad for too long and my fingers start to go numb, it's nature's way of telling me to take a break," Darowish said. "It sounds like a bad 'dad joke,' but if it hurts when you do those things, don't do them anymore."

Other treatments include rest, anti-inflammatories and wrapping the elbow in a towel at night to prevent ulnar nerve irritation while sleeping.

Neck injuries

"Text neck" happens when people hover over a laptop or phone and experience neck spasms due to poor posture. Most of the time, neck pain doesn't require surgery. Symptoms in addition to spasms may include tension headaches, grating or cracking of the neck.

Rest, exercise, and [anti-inflammatory medications](#) are the first line of defense. "Take the neck through a gentle range of motion by bending the head forward, backward, and turning side to side," Thompson said. "If the neck pain began shooting down one or both arms or causes difficulty with walking, it may be more serious and one should see their primary care physician. Many of these issues are still responsive to nonoperative care."

Studies conflict as to whether gaming or texting causes carpal tunnel syndrome, a condition affecting the median nerve that controls the thumb, index and middle fingers. People who experience symptoms of hand or wrist pain should rest, use anti-inflammatories, stretch the wrists or consider wearing a brace at night.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

APA citation: 'Swiper's thumb?' Explore some common tech-related injuries (2020, February 13) retrieved 13 August 2022 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-02-swiper-thumb-explore-common-tech-related.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.