



Computer Kids May Face Long-Term Injuries If Not Properly Monitored

It's a running joke that if you have a problem with your computer the best person to ask for help is a kid. Yet kids who spend a lot of time using computers may be headed for long-term health problems unless they change the way they use this technology, warns the American Physical Therapy Association (APTA).

"We are seeing an increasing number of children with physical injuries from computer use that are more typical of those found in adults, such as carpal tunnel syndrome, tendonitis, and tension headaches," says physical therapist and APTA member Patrice Winter, MS, MPT. "Computers have become a large part of children's lives, both at home and at school. Parents and teachers need to know, however, that there are health consequences to computer use."

These negative health consequences stem from two common mistakes. First, sitting too long at the computer without moving around or changing position can result in repetitive motion disorders and muscle strain. Second, incorrect ergonomics such as not sitting up straight, not keeping eyes level with the screen, not keeping elbows and knees at right angles, and not using the correct-size mouse can trigger various physical ailments.

Although no national statistics exist on the subject, increasing numbers of repetitive strain injuries such as carpal tunnel syndrome (pressure and swelling of the median nerve inside the narrow tunnel in the wrist) and tendonitis (an inflammation of the tendons which occurs after repetitive motion or excessive stress) have been recorded among younger Americans. Muscle aches in the lower back, wrists, and shoulders have also been seen in many cases as young people sit at monitors for long periods of time. The results have been numbness, headaches, neck pain, upper back pain, and stiffness of joints and muscles.

With 65 percent of American households having at least one computer and with schools providing almost one computer for every five students, the opportunity for long-term injuries on young bodies is greater than ever.

Physical therapists recommend that children using computers keep their feet flat on the floor, sit up straight, keep their eyes level with the screen and take mandatory breaks at least every 20 minutes to avoid muscle fatigue. For younger children who may be sitting at adult-size computer workstations, physical therapists suggest that a stool or other object be placed on the floor to keep the child's knees at a 90-degree angle. In addition, physical therapists recommend the use of wrist rests, which help to keep the hands and wrists in the correct position and reduce fatigue, and glare screens to reduce reflections.

Because of their extensive knowledge of the body's muscles, nerves, and bones, physical therapists are able to assess a person's potential risk for conditions such as carpal tunnel

syndrome. A physical therapist may detect early symptoms and develop an intervention program that includes stretching, exercise, and adjustments to the overall work environment. If you or anyone you know is experiencing symptoms of carpal tunnel syndrome, neck and back pain, or muscle aches and stiffness, consult a physical therapist.

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3/3/2007