

Body Sense

summer 2012


massage, bodywork & healthy living

Get the Most from Your Massage

5 Keys to Increasing
Bodywork's Effectiveness

Are Mobile Devices Worth the Pain?

The Truth Behind Cracking Your Neck
(and Back and Fingers)

 Try This Breathwork
Exercise! (page 13)

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Is the Convenience of Mobile Devices Worth the Pain?

Addressing “Smartphone Thumb” and “Text Neck” Syndrome

By Jeffrey A. Simancek

Throughout history, some diseases and disorders appear, disappear, and come back repackaged with a new name.

In 1895, Swiss surgeon Fritz de Quervain published case reports regarding the thickening of the dorsal compartment, or backside, of the wrist on the thumb side as a result of repetitive motion and friction of the tendons that attach to the thumb. The repetitive overuse disorder was first christened “De Quervain’s tenosynovitis,” but has since come to be known by many other names, including “Washer Woman’s Sprain” and “Mother’s Wrist/Thumb.” The disorder reappeared in the 1980s as a result of video games, putting a younger generation at risk for repetitive thumb movements. Most recently, it has become known by a new name that reflects the current trends of society—“Smartphone Thumb.”

De Quervain’s tenosynovitis presents symptoms including pain and fatigue in the hands and wrist due to prolonged ulnar deviation (bending the wrist toward the thumb side), and repetitive flexion and extension movements of the thumb. Repeating these motions causes the muscles of the thumb to be elongated or stretched against the styloid process of the radius, resulting in friction and wear. Continuous flexion and extension of the thumb (such as texting) causes overuse and strain of the smaller thumb muscles and some forearm muscles.

General fatigue and soreness in the hands and wrist is one of the first signs of De Quervain’s tenosynovitis. Pressure and tenderness at the “snuff box”—the area at the side of the wrist on the thumb side—is also a sign.

TEXT NECK SYNDROME

Although Smartphone Thumb may not be breaking news in today’s society, we are now seeing the same trend used to give another old disorder a new glitzy name: “Text Neck Syndrome.” The underlying condition of Text Neck Syndrome has been around for years. Before mobile communications were prevalent, it was associated with spending hours in front of a computer. Before computers, it was reading or writing. Although this syndrome has historically been associated with older clientele, it is now affecting a new, younger audience.

Mobile technologies are allowing society to take the workplace wherever they go; unfortunately, proper ergonomics do not always follow. Visit a bookstore, coffee house, or Internet cafe, and you will see people typing away on their

laptops, phones, or tablets. These workers are often unable to control the ergonomics of their location. Laptop computers find themselves on tabletops, forcing users to elevate their shoulders, creating contractions in the numerous lateral and posterior neck muscles. If the laptop is not on a table, it is often in users' laps, causing them to depress and roll their shoulders forward, increasing their thoracic curvature and looking down in that Text Neck position.

Text Neck Syndrome creates a decreased curvature, or flattening, of the lower neck area, bringing the head forward and forcing an increased curvature of the upper neck. The flattening of the lower cervical curve increases the pressure on the anterior portion of the vertebrae and can result in compression of nerves and tightening of muscles in the neck. This could also potentially lead to arthritis in the neck. Prolonged contractions of the posterior musculature of the neck and head, which are necessary to hold the imbalanced forward head posture, can lead to pain, spasms, and tension headaches.




THERAPEUTIC INTERVENTIONS

Understanding the trends of today's society and the potential conditions they may cause is important. By the year 2016, with no growth in the current trend, there will be about 4.9 million telecommuters in the United States. According to the Text Neck Institute in Plantation, Florida (www.text-neck.com), more than 4 billion mobile phones are in use worldwide. The average teenager spends 6–7 hours a day on some form of mobile technology. A recent study by the Kaiser Family Foundation states that teens, and children over age 8, send an average of 118 texts per day.

The technological advancements of today's society have provided many conveniences, but they have also impacted body mechanics, position, and postures. Smartphone Thumb and Text Neck Syndrome are increasing in frequency, and starting to affect a younger, and larger, population.

Self-assessment and therapeutic interventions are two steps that help people with the pains of mobile devices. Ask yourself, "How often am I texting each day? Am I holding my device up to read, or am I stressing my neck by looking down at it? Do I experience any pain or stiffness due to the use of my mobile device?"

The good news is that help is only a conversation away. Talk with your massage therapist about proper body mechanics or positional changes you can make to help alleviate the discomfort you experience during and after using your mobile device. Your therapist can also recommend changes you can make at your home or portable office to prevent future injuries. Most importantly, get a massage therapist to work out the kinks and adhesions created from prolonged postural positioning like the forward head and flexed neck of Text Neck Syndrome, and the stress and strain in your hands and wrists from Smartphone Thumb. 

Jeffrey A. Simancek has more than 15 years of experience as a bodyworker. He is an author, educator, and continuing education provider. He is currently teaching massage and has his own practice in Irvine, California. You can find him on Facebook at www.facebook.com/wolftracksmassage.