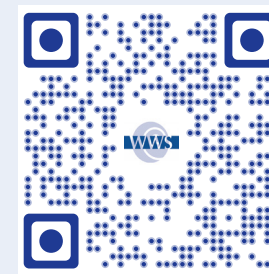




By Jenna McLane PT, DPT

## Aches and Pains of Tech Neck



*“... Physical therapy can help you alleviate existing pain and learn strategies to improve your relationship with your devices to reduce pain recurrence ...”*

Fall is a very busy time of the year for many. The lazy days of summer have come to an end, and schedules quickly fill up with back-to-school activities. Recreational sports are in full swing, and many families find themselves juggling multiple schedules, homework, and professional duties on the run. I frequently see parents propped up in folding chairs checking in on Slack while sitting on the sidelines at soccer practice. Others are taking meetings on their phone while in line at school or picking up or sending messages in Teams from the waiting area at dance class.

Cellphones and laptops have helped us become more productive, but the 24/7 accessibility of the digital world has led to a host of new aches and pains. One frequently reported problem in our physical therapy clinic is neck pain associated with long hours on devices. “Tech Neck” or “Text Neck” as some call it, refers to the aching, soreness, and stiffness through the neck and upper back associated with prolonged time in front of a screen. Have no worries though, physical therapy can help!

A quick Google search indicates that the average adult spends about 7 hours a day looking at a screen. Some studies indicate that for teenagers, this number is even higher! This is quite a long time for our bodies

to stay in one position, and inadvertently many of us fatigue into a flexed posture, otherwise known as forward head posture, as we stare at our screens.

Forward head posture is the first image that comes to mind when I think of tech neck. This is the individual sitting at a desk or laptop staring straight ahead. Their head is stuck out in front of them, their shoulders and upper back are rounded, and their upper neck is actually in extension in order to keep their gaze forward. This posture, when assumed chronically, leads to muscle imbalance throughout the neck, chest, and thoracic spine.

Physical therapists have been helping people with forward head posture for many years. Individuals with forward head posture may report neck and upper back pain, headaches, shoulder pain, and even chest tightness. This posture has also been associated with jaw pain (“TMJ” or temporomandibular joint pain) as well as some types of dizziness. Dizziness due to neck tightness can be related to impaired position sense known as proprioception. Over time, this posture can also lead to reduced respiratory capacity and can even impair balance due to the weight of the head being displaced so far forward over the trunk.

The alternative posture I witness in patients with tech neck, especially those whose screen time is more cell phone vs. laptop

based, is one of marked upper cervical flexion. The image that comes to mind here is a young adult with headphones in, staring straight down at a screen directly below their nose as they walk down the street. As you see them approaching, you may wonder if they will walk right into you! This individual has a greater amount of upper cervical flexion present and less flexion in their thoracic spine. The weight of their head flexed over puts increased pressure on the neck and upper back. This tends to be present in more of our teenage clients complaining of neck pain.

The reality is our devices are not going anywhere; therefore, we need to learn to live with them in a healthier way. Physical therapy can help you alleviate existing pain and learn strategies to

improve your relationship with your devices to reduce pain recurrence.

Once referred to physical therapy, you will be evaluated for your pain and overall mobility. Movement and posture screens of your neck down to your spine will be completed to determine what contributing factors may be affecting your unique experience. Strength will be assessed to determine which muscles may need to be improved upon for better endurance during the workday. You may learn stretches to reduce pain and will be educated on strategies to improve your posture while working on your device.

If you have been dealing with tech neck pain, consider trying a few simple strategies during your day. First, stop for a moment and imagine there

is a string on top of your head pulling you up tall. Take a deep breath in and exhale slowly. Squeeze your shoulder blades back gently. Then try moving your head straight backward while keeping your chin tucked slightly, to bring your ears in line with your shoulders. This position, called “cervical retraction,” is the opposite of the forward head posture and it can help reverse the rounded posture you likely had been in. Creating awareness about your posture is just the start.

Getting up throughout the day as frequently as you are able and trying to make time for regular exercise whether at the gym or as “exercise snacks” during the day is important to reverse the sitting posture. If these adjustments do not help, please schedule a physical therapy evaluation at WWSPT!



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