

## **Five-Minute Stress Relief.com**

### **Protecting Your Hands**

#### **Statistics**

One-third of all adults have either arthritis or some other chronic joint problem.

#### **Arthritis**

- Causes symptoms of pain, swelling in the joint of the hands or deformed shapes of fingers.
- Other symptoms are chronic stiffness, loss of motion and limited functioning.
- May prevent one from making a fist or grasping objects tightly.

#### **Carpal Tunnel Syndrome**

- Carpal Tunnel Syndrome refers to a very slim passageway that is on the underside (palm side) of your wrist.
- This condition is caused by a narrowing of space (due to the swelling of connective tissue) around the median nerve, which runs through the underside of the wrist.
- Trouble starts with a dull aching in the wrist. After a while, a sharper pain follows.
- Next stage brings a weakness or tingling in the fingers (thumb, index, middle and ring finger) leading to difficulty holding on firmly to objects.
- This tingling (or numbness) in the fingers may become noticeable when gripping common objects like a car steering wheel or a telephone receiver.
- Advanced cases bring pain traveling from the wrist, up the arm.
- Pain can come during daily work or at night, awakening the person from sleep.
- Carpal tunnel Syndrome afflicts 2-3% of Americans. Women are three times as likely as men are to develop this condition.

#### **Causes of Carpal Tunnel Syndrome**

- The most frequent cause is an inflammation of the connective tissue lining that surrounds the muscle tendons in the wrist.
- Rheumatoid Arthritis is sometimes a cause in a minority of cases.
- Repetitive Motion Injury is the main culprit, which means performing tasks that involve a flexing motion over and over. The best example is the supermarket cashiers who bend their wrists endlessly as they scan items into the computer.
- Office workers also are also a high-risk group due to typing, answering phones, filing documents, working copiers and fax machines with countless, repetitive motions.
- Experts cite that moving fingers in different directions especially leads to carpal tunnel.

#### **How to Protect Your Hands From Injuries**

Of course, it's important to have your condition examined by your doctor and properly diagnosed. Aside from this, here are some general guidelines to protect you from injury and to relieve pain:

- Repetitive motion injuries occur when small irritations are inflicted on the body over many times performing the same motion. So refining your work techniques become quite significant for the long run.

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### How to Protect Your Hands From Injuries - continued

- Relax your fingers and do not use more force than necessary. If you constantly write, use a large pen with easy flowing ink and a cushion adaptor around it, to ease your mechanics.
- Work with the wrists level, not flexing down or upward, as you use computers, typewriters, copy and fax machines, etc. You can check your wrist angle by taping a band-aid or scotch tape lengthwise over the wrist(s). If you work motion stretches the tape and skin, or if it slackens the tape, then your wrist position is not neutral.
- A wrist cushion is a rectangular pad placed in front of the keyboard that supports your wrists as you type. A wrist cushion might be the answer to aligning your hand level to the keyboard. Many people are surprised by how much less stress is placed on their wrists while using a good cushion.
- If you suffer from carpal tunnel pain or some other hand injury that is worsened by using a computer mouse, you might find a great relief from switching the mouse to the other side and learning to work your mouse with your other hand. Of course, work moves a lot slower at first. Your weak hand may never be as strong but, over time, it will get better. One of our staff did this for 6 months and eliminating "mouse irritation" was a major factor in completely relieving their pain. (They retained this working change, never had the pain return and work just as fast as they did before.)
- Take periodic breaks and gently stretch your hands and fingers, but do not bend your wrists too far. Rest your wrists on your lap, with your palms facing upward.
- Good posture also helps to reposition the arms and relieve undue pressure on the wrists.
- Stay warm. Coldness is more liable to cause stiffness and pain. If necessary, use gloves, (cutting the top of the fingers off), to retain delicate control of the fingers.
- Do not tighten screws or bolts, etc. with bare hands. Always use a tool to protect against strain.
- When vacuuming or cleaning, go easy and gently, rather than rushing and straining your hands.
- Don't carry many packages at once, forcing the fingers to grip many ways.
- Besides, carpal tunnel syndrome, you may develop Tendonitis, a condition that happens when tendons become swollen and inflamed from overuse. Tendonitis can affect shoulders and elbows besides wrists.

### New Culprit – ‘Blackberry Thumb’

The extended use of PDAs (personal digital assistants) has led to a dramatic rise in repetitive-stress injury problems. ‘Blackberry Thumb’ is named for the hugely popular Blackberry PDA and refers to a stress injury causing pain and/or numbness in the thumbs and joints of the hands. Because the keyboard is so small, users are seduced into using their thumbs (the least flexible digit of the hand) for typing e-mails, instant messaging, and accessing the Internet. And because most of the users of this expensive device are middle-aged workers, overuse can also aggravate underlying arthritis. Suggestions for users are to:

- Type fewer, shorter messages and abbreviate as much as possible.
- Avoid typing with the thumb. Place a support of some kind in your lap to keep your wrists from flexing or bending, and use your fingers to type.

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### Self Help at Home

- At home, you can help to remedy hand, wrist and/or forearm pain. When you're relaxing in the evening, (watching TV, a movie, or reading a book), apply a cold pack/ice pack your injury area to reduce inflammation and swelling. Since the inflamed muscles and tendons are very close to the skin surface, applying cold packs to fingers, wrist and/or forearm is extremely effective for reducing pain and inflammation. Most people feel some relief within 10-15 minutes of applying cold pack to the painful area.
- For best results, use cold packs consistently. The ongoing application of healing cold treatments (cryotherapy) helps the body to reduce inflammation and repair damage to muscle, tendons and ligaments at a faster rate. If you can't afford to buy a cold pack, use a pack of frozen vegetables, etc. in its place.
- For more information on using cold packs, see (Physical Stress Section) **Dealing With Muscle Pain: Basic Sports Therapy – Applying Ice.**

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**Sources: The Carpal Tunnel Syndrome** *Journal of Emergency Medicine* 1999 May-Jun;17(3):519-23  
**Carpal Tunnel Syndrome: A Guide to Prompt Intervention** *Postgraduate Medicine* 1995  
Jan;97(1):89-92, 95-6 **Carpal Tunnel Syndrome** (<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus>) **Stress Tips Handbook** *Academy of Stress Management* Richard Lewis ISBN 0-9664069-4-X