

Are You Developing Smartphone Neck?



How often are we doing something in which we actually look up?

STRESS ON THE SPINE

The normal curves of the spine reduce the stress in our spine by 10 times. That may be hard to believe, but think about a spring—by being curved, it does not bend at one point, but the stress is absorbed throughout the spring. The same is true of our spine in that the curves help to absorb shock and stress.

Activities in modern society tend to move these curves into a flexed position. We have all seen the elderly with severe kyphosis, also termed a dowager’s hump. This occurs over years of being bent forward and the person usually is not aware of the problem until it has already become severe.

A research study was done in which needles measured the pressure inside the intervertebral disks in the neck. Standing with normal posture caused 12 pounds of pressure on a disk. The forward head position triples the pressure! This increase in pressure may accelerate disk degeneration, arthritis and disk bulging or herniation. This helps to explain why these problems are so common. Reportedly, 60 percent of people over age 40 have some degree of cervical disk degeneration. Younger people are also being affected, and may be at higher risk due to the use of texting and phones.

The forward head position compresses the muscles at the base of the skull and can cause headaches. This can particularly cause pain in the back of the head, which can sometimes radiate into the forehead or behind the eye. Muscle spasm may be a significant part of this problem.

Damage to structures in the neck can also cause pain that radiates into the top of the shoulder, in between the shoulder blades and into an arm. This usually affects only one side. The symptoms may include pain, numbness, tingling, burning and aching. Positions that usually make these things worse are using a computer, driving, eating, reading and bending forward.

FIXING POSITIONS

What can be done to correct these problems? The good news is that many of these cases can

be alleviated completely. A physical therapist can help with this process. Correction involves changing the root cause of the symptoms, such as posture correction, chair change or changing driving position. This may also include stretching the chest and front of the neck, and strengthening of the upper back. Cervical traction may also help with disk related symptoms. Soft-tissue mobilization and stretches may help tight muscles to relax. It does take a lot of work to change long-term habits.

One thing you can do right now is to evaluate the position you are in when using your phone, computer, etc. Are you holding your head straight? The wall test is a classic way of determining “normal posture.” Stand against a wall with your buttocks, shoulders and back of head touching with your eyes level. This is “normal,” although not everyone can attain this position. It should be noted that “normal posture” is not good for everyone, and therefore, an evaluation by a doctor or therapist can help determine what is best for you.

iPhone® neck can be a surprising cause of many headaches, neck and arm pain. The great news is that many times it can be corrected with conservative treatment. The take home message is not to ignore significant symptoms. The incidence of cases like the ones described has increased significantly over the last few years. A visit to your primary care doctor or physical therapist to evaluate these symptoms is a reasonable place to start. ■

The information for this Handout was provided by Jeremy McVay, DPT, CSCS, MPT, BS, owner of McVay Physical Therapy in Barrington, RI.

NOTES:

Constant smartphone use impacts everyday posture—often without being recognized.

Do you suffer from headaches in the back of your head or behind your eye? Do you get neck or shoulder pain, radiating pain or numbness that may include tingling or burning into your arms? Do you have a stiff neck in the morning? Have your symptoms become worse over months or even years? Does this happen when you drive, use your computer, sit on a recliner or use your phone?

If you answered yes to any of these, you may have what can be called “iPhone® neck”—a problem in the neck that develops from being in a bent forward position for too long a period of time. The hours that modern society spends in a flexed position continues to increase with activities such as watching TV, computer use, driving and texting.

Smart phones and computers have only compounded this in recent times. We eat bent forward, drive in a flexed position, watch TV or movies in a cushioned chair that we sink into- all pushing our spine in a flexed position.