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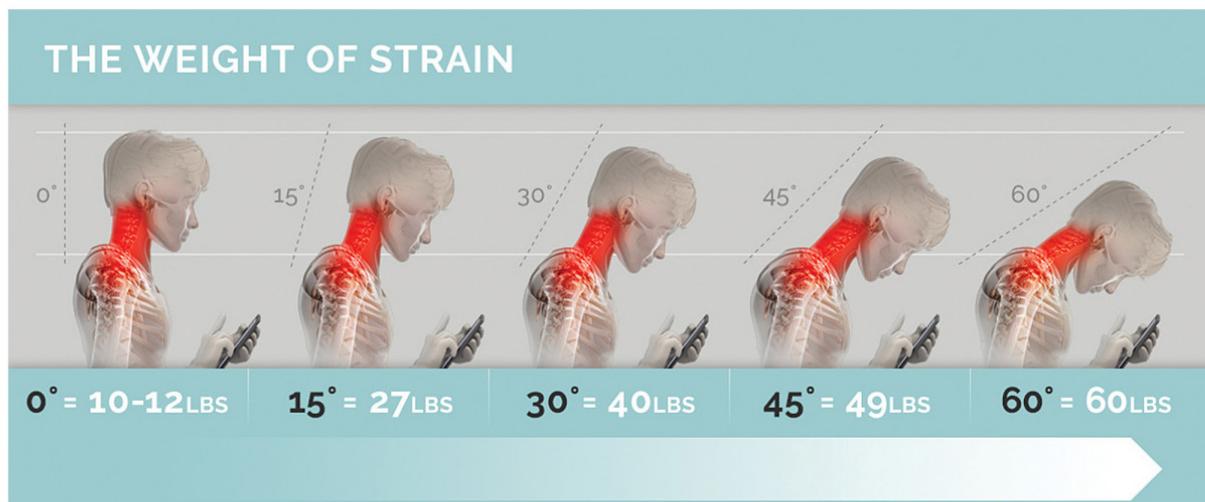
“Tech Neck” Is on the Rise. Here's How to Help Prevent It

NewYork-Presbyterian’s director of cervical spine surgery on technology-related neck and shoulder pain.

You see it everywhere. In homes and offices, while walking down the street, riding the bus or standing in line. “Tech neck,” the act of stressing muscles while using phones, tablets and computers, which results in neck and shoulder pain, stiffness and soreness, is a problem that’s getting worse.

According to eMarketer, in the last year Americans spent a daily average of 5 hours and 53 minutes with digital media, including 3 hours, 17 minutes a day on non-voice activities on mobile devices — a jump of more than an hour since 2013.

The result? Headaches, neck spasms and creaky shoulder joints, caused by holding one’s neck still for long periods, says [K. Daniel Riew](#), M.D., director of cervical spine surgery and co-director of spine surgery in the department of orthopedic surgery at the [Och Spine Hospital](#) at NewYork-Presbyterian. Here, Dr. Riew breaks down the causes and symptoms of tech neck and offers ways to correctly and safely align the body while using mobile phones, computers, and other digital media devices.



Source: Kenneth K. Hansraj, M.D.; “Assessment of Stresses in the Cervical Spine Caused by Posture and Position of the Head”; Surg Technol Int. 2014 Nov;25:277-9

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Q: What causes “tech neck”?

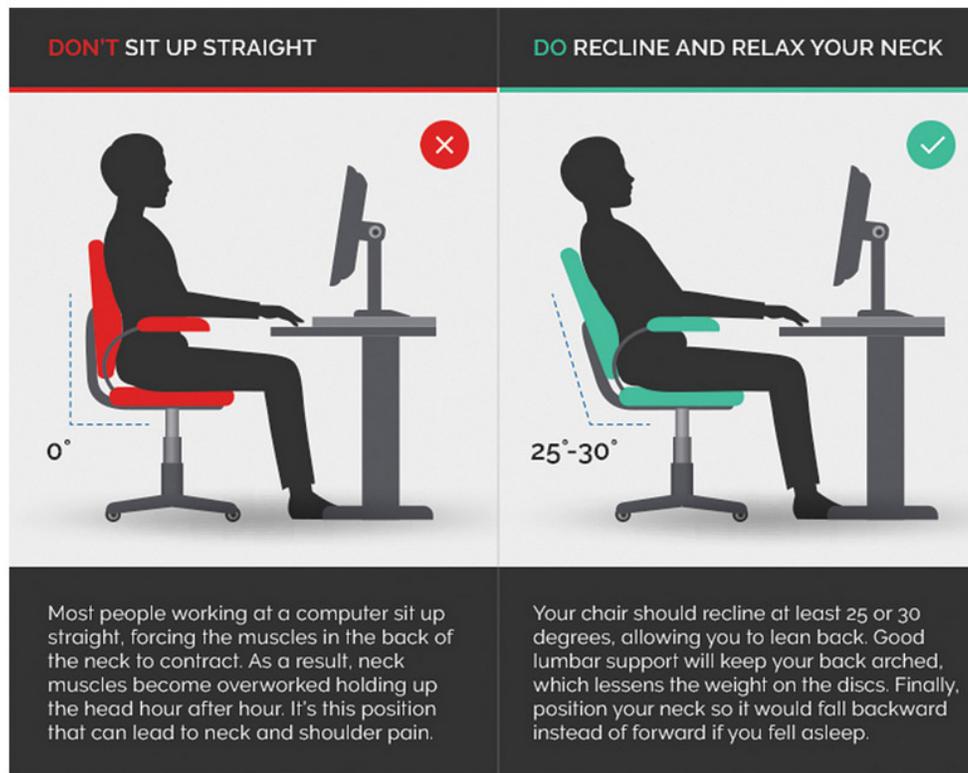
A: When you’re working on a computer or looking down at your phone, the muscles in the back of the neck have to contract to hold your head up. The more you look down, the more the muscles have to work to keep your head up. These muscles can get overly tired and sore from looking down at our smartphones, working on computers or looking down at our tablets all day. That’s what we call “tech neck.”

Most people have been told to sit up straight when working on a computer. I’ve heard that advice given by doctors, therapists and other experts. Unfortunately, this is incorrect advice. When you sit with your back straight, you not only put a lot of force on the discs in your lower back, but the muscles in the back of the neck have to contract to hold the head up. So, if you sit straight up for hours, you may end up with both back and neck pain.

Q: So how should you sit?

A: A better way to sit is with the chair reclining 25 to 30 degrees with a good lumbar support to prevent slouching. In this position, the discs in the back, as well as the neck, are subjected to much lower forces than in an upright position, and the muscles in the back of the neck no longer have to contract to hold your head up.

When you lean back, part of your body’s weight goes into the chair instead of straight down your spine. So your spine sees a lot less force, and, as a result, you hurt a lot less. Most people do this intuitively by using reclining chairs when they are relaxing because it doesn’t hurt the neck or back as much as sitting straight.



Source: NewYork-Presbyterian's Health Matters and Dr. K. Daniel Riew

Q: What are the symptoms of tech neck?

A: Headaches, stiff necks, neck spasms and pain between your shoulder blades are common complaints. Some people say they have a hard time looking up after looking down for a long time. In severe situations you could get numbness or tingling or weakness that goes down into your arms because of a pinched nerve in your neck.

Q: How can tech neck cause more serious problems?

A: What happens initially is that the muscles have to strain to hold your head up. But the muscles tighten, and, as they do, they put more pressure on the discs. That makes the discs wear out faster, and as the discs wear out faster, they can bulge or even rupture. If the ruptured disc pinches a nerve, you can get pain, weakness or numbness in the arm, which may end up requiring surgical treatment.

“At just 45 degrees, your neck muscles are doing the work of lifting a 50 lb. bag of potatoes.”
— Dr. K. Daniel Riew

Q: How many people suffer from tech neck?

A: It probably is close to 100 percent. Virtually anybody who spends a lot of time on a computer is eventually going to complain about it. Almost every patient that I see says that working on a computer usually makes their neck pain worse. It's the rare person with a neck issue who says, "Oh yeah, I can work on a computer for hours every day and not have my neck bother me."

Q: How can one alleviate the symptoms?

A: No. 1 is to get up and move frequently. If you have a sedentary sitting job, at least every 15 to 30 minutes, you should get up and walk around, even if it's for a minute. That'll get blood circulating, and it will get your neck in a different position. It's not only good for your neck, but also the rest of your body. Studies show that sitting for long periods is dangerous to your heart and that it leads to a shortened life span.

No. 2, get a chair that reclines with a very good lumbar support, and lean back as much as practical while you're working. That will take the pressure off of the neck muscles so that they aren't strained. You can tell if you are leaning back adequately by doing the following: First, if you were to fall asleep in that position, your neck should fall backward. Alternatively, if you put your hand at the back of your neck, as you lean forward, you'll find that the neck muscles contract and stiffen up. As you lean backward they will relax and get soft.

No. 3, see if you can work standing up, as much as possible.

Q: When should one see a doctor?

A: If you have a tech neck, the last person you should see is a surgeon. They're not going to be able to help because the solution isn't an operation. It would be better to see a physical medicine and rehabilitation [PM&R, also known as a physiatrist] doctor. They are doctors who take care of bone and joint problems in a non-operative manner. We have several of the top PM&R doctors in the world at NewYork-Presbyterian's [Och Spine Hospital](#). If their non-operative measures don't work or if you have ongoing problems such as constant numbness or weakness in the arms, then it's time to consider surgery and see a surgeon.

Q: How can one prevent tech neck?

A: If you have neck pain that really bothers you, I recommend doing some form of aerobic exercise on a regular basis. That could be using ellipticals, recumbent stationary bicycles, jogging, swimming or walking at a brisk pace. Choose an aerobic activity that doesn't cause you neck pain while you are doing it or the next day. If you do it for a sustained period, about 20 to 30 minutes three or four times a week, getting your heart rate and respiratory rate up and working up a good sweat, that will keep your neck and back much healthier. It will also help ease the tension in the back of the neck.

Q: How does exercise help?

A: When you do aerobic exercise, it sends oxygenated blood to those tired muscles and washes away the chemicals that cause inflammation and pain. If I have a long day where I have to work on a computer for long hours, I'll go home and exercise for 45 minutes and I feel much better.

Och Spine Hospital at NewYork-Presbyterian Allen Hospital provides comprehensive and coordinated spine care treatment for common spine disorders and rare, hard-to-treat spinal deformities. As part of New York's No. 1 hospital, according to U.S. News and World Report, our world-renowned Columbia University Irving Medical Center physicians and surgeons use the most advanced technology and innovative techniques to restore mobility and function for children, adolescents, and adult patients from around the world. To make an appointment or to learn more about our integrated Spine Hospital, please visit nyp.org/spinehospital or call 844-697-2229.

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