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Is Your Laptop a Pain in the Neck?

By Dr. Vincent Portera

Laptops, due to advanced technology and a demand for convenience, have become a staple for today's business executive. One only has to visit any airport to observe people keyboarding away or watching the latest movie on DVD. Airplanes have special use rules during flight because of the proliferation of such devices and the near absolute necessity for any business traveler.

Since they are small, thin, and relatively light, they are easily transported wherever you go. The simple convenience of having immediate access to one of your most vital assets, business information, urges us to take them along with us sometimes even when we go on vacation. One can easily feel cursed by this seemingly "attached to the hip" piece of equipment. The question is "is this the only curse caused by this ubiquitous new companion?"

REPETITIVE STRESS

Working from a laptop computer has inherent ergonomic and biomechanical challenges. After all, they typically sit on some work surface which is generally not adjustable leaving the keyboard at times in position for poor and "at risk" forearm, wrist, and hand use. Additionally, the monitor position is too low causing us to hold our twelve-pound heads in a downward position for extended periods of time. By the time we are done working we feel "done in" and perhaps maybe even "cursing" the tool thought so helpful just a short while ago.

Contrary to popular belief, pain in the neck and shoulder areas is not due to just emotional stress or too much work. A major cause is improper use of laptop computers (and desktop computers)!

So, given that laptops are here to stay what can be done to help us feel better during and after use of them?

Good News! There are some things you can do to lessen the stress on muscles, tendons, and joints. Following are some quick simple tips that can be incorporated on the road as well as back at the office.

On The Road:

1. While on an airplane place a book, magazine, or even a three ring binder under the back 2/3 or so of the laptop. The idea is to "prop" or tilt the keyboard portion so it slants towards you. This is similar to the old typewriters of yesteryear. At the same time this raises the monitor up somewhat. In the end you use less neck flexion (looking down), which results in less neck muscle tension, fatigue, and possibly pain. Your wrists will remain straight, as they should be. What you end up sacrificing is a healthy "neutral or open angle" at the elbows (90-110 degrees). This means your hands are higher than your elbows, which is not ideal, but is the least stressful component.

2. While working in a hotel place a phone book or binder under the laptop much like you did on an airplane. This will provide the same solution and result. Some hotels even have plastic laptop sleeves that you slide it into which automatically holds it at an angle. You can purchase these at any office or computer store and take one with you. You should also take out your external mouse and use it rather than the laptop glide pad, etc.
3. Stretch your forearms, wrists, hands, and neck often. Every time your fingers depress a key your forearm muscles are contracting. Over time these muscles shorten and then become tight. This in turn reduces blood and nutrient flow into the soft tissues as well as diminishes the removal of waste out of the tissues. Eventually your muscles can become weak and possibly inflamed or injured. Stretching your muscles periodically relaxes the short tight muscles and restores proper flow of blood, nutrients, and the removal of waste by-products.
 - **Neck stretches** - Periodically tilt your head back, forward, to the sides, and then rotate it. (Stop if you feel pain other than a stretch)
 - **Chin Tuck** - While keeping your head level, draw your chin backward (as a pigeon does). Hold for a few seconds and relax. You should feel a gentle stretch in the back of your neck. Repeat this motion 3 times.
 - **Wrist/Hand** - Sit with your palm facing up, your elbow at your side, and forearm parallel to the ground. Grasp your fingers close to where they join your palm and gently pull them down towards the floor. Hold for 2-3 breaths. Then in the same position gently pull your thumb down. Next, return to your fingers and gently pull them down as before while you straighten your arm out and hold. Now, with your arm straight out turn hand palm down and gently bend your hand down at the wrist and hold for a few seconds. Switch hands.

As with any stretching program discontinue if pain arises and/or consult your healthcare provider before doing these.

At The Office:

The best solution while working at your own desk is to utilize a docking station for the laptop; a separate monitor with adjustable riser and a separate full size keyboard with adjustable tray. This allows maximum adjustability and comfort while working. If you do not have a separate monitor you could place the laptop and docking station on top of the monitor riser and use the laptop monitor as is. This way you can set up the monitor to be at or slightly below eye level, which will maintain your neck in a comfortable and neutral posture. Lastly, an adjustable office chair is also important.

Once again, periodic stretches as described above will offset the build-up of physical stress and keep your muscles flexible and comfortable.

YOU CAN CONTROL HOW YOU FEEL

These simple tips can make a difference in the quality of your life. Let's face it keyboards and mice do not attack us. They just sit there and do what we tell them to do. It is the choices we make in how we use them that put us in control of how we feel. Laptops are here to stay, cursed or not, we might as well enjoy the experience.



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