

# 'Tech neck' is a pain in more than just the neck

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The typical average adult head weighs approximately 10–12 pounds. But did you know that bending it forward at a 45-degree angle to look at a cellphone or tablet can dramatically increase your chances to have "tech

neck?"

"That's like having an 8-pound bowling ball as your head. Then you have 72 pounds at your elbow and 96 pounds on your shoulder," says Brian Langenhorst, industrial and ergonomics specialist at Mayo Clinic Health System in La Crosse. "I probably see tech neck on a weekly basis at businesses, schools and industry."

Tech neck is any form of chronic neck or [shoulder pain](#), soreness, or stiffness caused by poor posture while using technology such as phones or computers. Looking down at [electronic devices](#) causes the [neck muscles](#) to strain and the shoulders to slump forward.

"People will notice some musculoskeletal fatigue," explains Langenhorst. "They may notice pressure on nerve supply, which then can have some referred pain, and pressure on nerve supply within the neck that can have referred pain within the arms and hands."

Over time, this position can deform your shoulder, chest and neck muscles and put pressure on your spine.

"You may have eight to 10 hours at work on a computer. Then you're home for two to four hours on a computer or on your phone. That's extremely fatiguing to your neck and body," says Langenhorst.

"With cellphones, we're having to bring them closer to maintain visual comfort," adds Langenhorst. "What I find all too often is many people don't move enough. They are staying in a static position for extremely long periods of time."

On average, people spend three hours and 15 minutes on their phones each day. Individuals check their phones an average of 58 times each day. Almost half (46%) of Americans believe they spend an average of

four to five hours on their smartphones each day. A 2020 study discovered that Americans will spend nearly nine years of their life using their phone.

"Static positioning is actually more work and more effort than dynamic movement," offers Langenhorst. "Your body is going to ask you do you want to have visual comfort or postural comfort. The key here is that vision always wins because we change our posture to accommodate vision."

Tech neck also can cause issues beyond your neck and shoulders. Extra spinal pressure in your neck can lead to lower back pain, headaches and herniated disks (slipped or bulging disks). Altered neck muscles and poor posture also can strain jaw joints and muscles, creating temporomandibular joint pain.

"Just think about kids and when they're home. They have their tablet, desktop or phone at home for homework. Just look at their posture and see what their posture looks like. Are they in a pretty good position? If they're not, they're probably in all sorts of kind of goofy postures," says Langenhorst.

"They can probably get away with it while they're a little bit younger and invincible. But soon, even in their early 20s, [muscle fatigue](#) is going to kick in, and we're going to notice some more strain and sprain. Make sure they're doing some consistent stretching and movement that we build into our day."

One tip Langenhorst also recommends is placing pillows on your lap allowing your forearms to be supported on those pillows. He also suggests trying to hold the phone at more of an upright, angled position.

"It's not great, but it's better than not being supported," Langenhorst

shares.

"As we age, the disks of our spine become narrowed, we start to lose some of the cushiness that's there. That can generate a little bit more pressure on the nerve roots that come out of the level of the neck. As you get older, meaning 45 and older, those disk spaces become narrower. That can put pressure on your nerves within your neck. Some people could notice a level of fatigue and discomfort, then generating into pain. Pain can then generate into disability."

## **Tips to improve tech neck**

Other ways to improve your computer posture include:

- Place your screen 20–30 inches away from your eyes (about an arm's length).
- Use a computer monitor or laptop stand to help elevate your screen to the right level (or stack some books).
- Sit with your head, hips and spine stacked. "My eye height should be about 1/2 inch to 1½ inches higher than the screen because we have a 15-degree eye gaze. When I'm looking straight ahead, my neck muscles and my back muscles and my upper shoulder muscles get a chance to relax. This prevents putting uneven pressures on the nerve supply or the muscle groups," adds Langenhorst.
- Keep your wrists straight and your elbows bent at about 90-degree angles.
- Keep your knees in line with your hips and your feet flat on the floor.

"The greatest challenge is we're not working or staying in a neutral or straight posture. I want to be able to have my head in an upright position, ears over shoulders, shoulders over hips," he says.

Neck pain is the fourth leading cause of disability, with an annual prevalence rate exceeding 30%. Most episodes of acute neck pain will resolve with or without treatment, but nearly 50% of people will continue to experience some degree of pain or frequent occurrences.

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