

Is your cellphone a source of pain?

October 5 2009, By Nancy Churnin

Jill Garonzik Kelley of Allen, Texas, is thankful for unlimited minutes on her cellphone. After all, she did rack up 4,500 last month. What the 41-year-old advertising strategist is not as happy about is the pain after a long day of calls.

"If I'm holding the phone on my shoulder and I don't move it around, it becomes a neck thing," she says. "And then sometimes I feel it in the middle of my forearm going right up through my wrist and it will hurt for a while."

The general aches cellphone users such as Kelley describe are sometimes referred to casually as "cellphone elbow." Less frequently, some might have pain related to excessive texting. Doctors, while careful to point out that the ailments are not necessarily caused by cellphone use, say they are seeing an increasing number of patients with such pains.

"Cellphone elbow" is associated with people who talk for long periods of time while holding their neck crooked and elbow bent.

There is no accurate gauge of how widespread the problem is, and not every cellphone user is affected the same way. But in extreme cases, the pain can be associated with a condition called cubital [tunnel syndrome](#). Similar to the pain associated with the better-known carpal tunnel syndrome, cubital tunnel syndrome is a compression of the ulnar nerve near the elbow.

Dr. Dennis Stripling, an orthopedist at Texas Health Presbyterian

Hospital Dallas who specializes in hand surgery, says he has seen an increased number of patients with the syndrome. "A significant number" of them complain of pain after holding a phone to their ear with their elbow flexed at more than 90 degrees, he says.

"People who do telephone sales will come in complaining about their left hand if they were holding the phone in their left hand and writing with their right."

Stripling explained that holding a phone to the ear with the elbow flexed may aggravate cubital tunnel syndrome, but that it does not necessarily cause it. Still, anyone who feels numbness and tingling along the side of the hand where the pinkie and the ring finger are should stop crooking that elbow. And if that doesn't help, consult a doctor immediately, or risk paralysis and permanent loss or impairment of fine-motor skills.

Dr. John White, an anesthesiologist, pain management specialist and partner at American Pain and Wellness in Plano, Texas, says he, too, sees more cellphone-related problems these days, although he does not blame the phones outright.

"With pain, there are usually overlapping issues," says White, who has been described by his patients as a "pain whisperer" -- someone who can spot the sometimes unexpected cause of someone's chronic pain and find the way to alleviate it.

"Sometimes there is chronic inflammation or an underlying postural issue in which one side is used more than the other. Then when you hold the phone against the shoulder or do repetitive texting, it becomes the straw that breaks the camel's back."

The problem with excessive texting is that it requires short little motions that don't effectively use the muscles, White says.

"You need to allow muscles their full range of movement from contraction to elongation. You need to take the time and put forth the effort periodically to make them happy by allowing them to be all they can be. Take a break, step back and take care of the muscles that are taking care of you."

Dr. Victoria Knoll, an orthopedic surgeon on the Baylor Regional Medical Center at Plano medical staff, believes that the most common condition caused by excessive cellphone use is overuse tendinitis. While the muscle, the tendon and the joint may be affected, the pain and inflammation occur in the tendon. The condition is also common to people who type all day on the computer, she says.

Knoll says she is most concerned when patients report numbness in their fingers, particularly at night or in the morning, or weakness in the hands.

These symptoms could indicate cubital tunnel syndrome or even tumors pushing on the nerves, she says. But if it hurts only while the person is using the cellphone or texting, then it's probably the less serious condition of overuse tendinitis.

And her solution?

"Quit the activity that aggravates it if you can," Knoll says. "And if that's not an option, find a way to change how you do it."

But younger users can take heart from Stripling's observation that cellphone pain seems to be a grown-up problem.

"I don't recall ever seeing any kids with problems associated with this -- just adults," he says. "Kids don't have as much tendency for stiffness with their more supple joints, and they have smaller digits so they don't have to compress them as much as adults do to text."

Keys or touch screen?

Are touch screens or screens with keys better for the thumbs?

Orthopedist Dennis Stripling says:

"The more important question is how big the screen is and how much room there is to press the buttons. Ultimately it's about how finely you have to adjust your positioning to reach the keys."

STOP THE PAIN

Doctors offer these tips for preventing pains associated with cellphone use:

Use a headset (for cellphone elbow) and a keyboard (for [texting](#)).

Get up and stretch every 30 minutes. Consider working with a hand therapist to learn proper hand stretching techniques or try doing yoga.

Consider the possibility that unbalanced posture is contributing to the problem.

Listen to your body. Don't ignore the pain. If adjustments don't alleviate distress, seek professional help.

SOURCES: Dr. John White, Dr. Victoria Knoll

EYESTRAIN

Cellphones with screens offer another hazard: eyestrain.

About one quarter of ophthalmologist Dr. Karen Bassichis Saland's patients suffer eyestrain from staring at computer screens. It's a percentage she expects will go up as cellphones with screens become increasingly popular.

"Right now it's so fresh that it's not talked about much," says Saland, who practices at Texas Health Presbyterian Hospital Dallas. "But when people stare at anything too long they forget to blink, which means they don't moisten their eyes. That leads to dry eye which, if unchecked, can impair vision. Dry eye can also cause eye strain."

And eyestrain can cause headaches, [pain](#) and fatigue, she says.

Saland says that she often tailors prescriptions for glasses in accordance with how far people sit from their computer screens. Now, she says, she may have to look at how many inches cellphone users keep their screens from their face.

Here are her tips on how to avoid cellphone eyestrain:

Apply artificial tears if you're looking at the screen for more than 30 minutes at a time.

Update the prescription for your glasses; tell your doctor how often you view your [cellphone](#) screen and how far you hold it from your eyes.

Consider getting a pair of glasses that are adjusted strictly for cell phone use.

Do not look at a bright screen in a dark room; keep the lights on dim at least

Take a break!

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