

Preventing Repetitive Motion Injuries

Advice For Everyone

You don't have to work on an assembly line or in front of a video display terminal to perform repetitive motions on the job. For instance, a salesperson making long-distance sales calls does a lot of driving, which demands repeated movements. And even if your job involves no repetitive motions, you may be able to improve your at-work mood — and your productivity — by following the simple tips presented here.

8 Ways to Guard Against Carpal Tunnel Syndrome

Carpal tunnel syndrome (CTS) is much easier to prevent than it is to cure. Working smart, keeping your wrists in mind, and taking warning signs seriously are keys to avoiding it.

To prevent these problems:

- 1 Strengthen the muscles** responsible for movements opposite of your repetitive motions. **Example:** If you type, occasionally flex your fingers and bend them back.
- 2 Take wrist and finger breaks,** even during leisure activities that involve repetitive motion, such as computer games and racquet sports.
- 3 Maintain good posture.** It can help prevent repetitive stress injuries of the wrists and hands, as well as the neck and back.
- 4 Grip objects using your whole hand** and fingers, not just your fingertips. When using any device, vary your movements to avoid repetitive motion.
- 5 Exercise regularly and stay fit.** Improved blood circulation helps your body repair the damage that could lead to CTS.
- 6 Don't smoke.** Smoking reduces blood flow and may make you more vulnerable to CTS.
- 7 Pay attention to aches and pains in your hands or fingers** — even numbness and "pins and needles" — that keep coming back or don't go away.
- 8 Talk to your supervisor** and seek medical help if symptoms recur or persist.

Your 1-Minute Prevention Program

Here are four easy-to-follow routines that help prevent wrist pain and strain:

The Hand Shake. About once every hour during tasks requiring repetitive motion, shake your hands in all directions for 10-15 seconds.

The Wrist Stretch. Hold your arms straight out with hands facing down, then raise your hands at the wrist until you feel the stretch in your forearms. Relax and repeat three times.

The Finger Fan. Make two tight fists, then spread your fingers as far apart as you can. Hold for five seconds, then relax. Repeat three times.

The Palm Push. Place your hands palm down on a table with fingers outstretched and wrists bent about 90 degrees. Gently press your palms against the table surface for five seconds. Relax and repeat three times.

Easy Does It

A study in the *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine* found that on average, workers hit computer keys with four to five times the force necessary.

Be Keyboard Smart

- Use a chair that supports your lower back.
- Sit up straight and relax your shoulders. Keep your knees higher than your hips and your feet flat on the floor or on a footrest.
- Adjust your chair and keyboard, so your forearms will be parallel to the floor and in line with your wrists.
- Use a padded wrist rest — avoid resting your wrists on sharp table edges.
- Tap the keys and mouse button gently — don't pound. Use finger movements to minimize wrist movements.
- Use both hands for hard-to-reach keystroke combinations instead of overextending the fingers of one hand.

More Hand and Wrist Care Tips

- Work** with tools that have textured handles, so you use less force when gripping them.
- Use** electric staplers, electric food processors and other helpful devices to give your hands a break.
- Relax** your hold on the steering wheel when driving.
- Rub** your hands together every so often during repetitive tasks to keep them warm and promote blood circulation.
- Massage** your wrists with your thumbs a few times daily.
- Shift** your weight from side to side occasionally when sitting to keep your body, hands and wrists relaxed.



Carpal Tunnel Syndrome: What Is It?

Whenever a part of the body is forced to repeat the same motion over and over for hours at a time, a problem known as repetitive motion injury (RMI) may develop.

When the wrists are affected, it is called carpal tunnel syndrome, named after a narrow channel in the wrist formed by bones and ligaments. Long, repetitive hand motion can cause the tendons in the area to swell, pinching the nerve. This may eventually lead to weakness and difficulty with opening and closing the hand.

Who Gets It?

Many work-related and leisure activities can lead to CTS, including typing, assembly line work, sewing, knitting, gardening, playing an instrument and woodworking. Some people may be at greater risk for CTS, such as individuals with diabetes or chronic arthritis, pregnant women, and women taking oral contraceptives or estrogen.

What Are The Warning Signs?

Here are the signs that mean you are overstraining your wrists. Watch out for:

- ✓ Numbness, burning or tingling in the fingers or hands
- ✓ Hand or finger weakness
- ✓ Wrist discomfort or pain that may shoot up the forearm, often feeling worse at night

It's Not Just at Work —

RMI can strike at home, too. Examples: playing racquet sports, woodworking, even gardening. So if you ever hurt, ease up. Pain is always a signal to stop.