

It's almost hard to believe there is now a term for a medical condition caused by too much screen time! The reality is (sad or not) that our postures have changed based on our cultural and lifestyle choices.

'Text' Neck is an overuse syndrome or a repetitive stress injury to the neck caused by holding your head in a forward and downward position for extended periods of time. When holding your head in this position, excessive amounts of tension are created in the deep muscles of your neck and across the shoulders causing both acute and chronic neck pain. Chronic headaches have also been linked to this condition.

The increased frequency of these pains is due to the increasing popularity and hours people spend on handheld devices such as smartphones, e-readers, iPads and tablets.

WHAT EXACTLY CAUSES 'TEXT' NECK?

In an upright posture, when your ear lobes are aligned with the centre of your shoulders, the weight of the average head exerts approximately 4.5 to 5.5 kgs of force through the muscles and joints of the neck.

However, when your head is moved forward by only 2 to 3cms away from this neutral position, the weight of your head dramatically increases, and approximately 6 times as much force can be generated. This translates to approximately 30kg, the same weight as an average 8-year-old, or 6 ten-pin bowling balls!

If left untreated, a 'text' neck can lead to the inflammation of the neck ligaments, nerve irritation and increased curvature (lordosis) in the cervical (neck) spine. It can also develop an upper thoracic postural deformity known as a "dowagers" hump (a protruding lump at the base of your neck), which can result in alteration of the bone structure of your vertebrae in this region.

'Text' Neck



SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF 'TEXT' NECK

'Text' neck may have one or more of these signs and symptoms:

- Instant or delayed-onset upper back or neck pain when using a handheld device, and for hours following use
- Nagging or sharp pain in the neck or shoulders at the end of the day or postural fatigue
- General shoulder pain and tightness
- 'Head forward' or 'chin poke' posture
- Intermittent or constant headaches made worse when looking down or using the computer
- Nerve irritation referring pain into your head or down your arms
- Limited neck mobility and muscle spasm.

TREATMENT FOR 'TEXT' NECK

'Text' neck can be managed conservatively (ie. without an operation) by a physical or massage therapist. The main aims of treatment are to reduce the tension within the neck muscles, reduce the pain within your neck and address the postures that aggravate your symptoms.

This includes:

- Postural awareness
- Strengthening exercises for your neck muscles
- Stretching to relieve muscle tightness and improve mobility in your neck and shoulders
- Correcting sitting postures, desk use and finding ways to support your arms or shoulders whilst using devices.

After your clinician has assessed your lifestyle, posture and your neck structures their treatments may include:

- Joint mobilisations
- Exercise therapy
- Postural taping techniques
- Soft tissue massage, heat therapy, dry needling, electrotherapy
- Posture and ergonomic education.

PHASE I - Reducing Pain & Inflammation

Pain and inflammation are strong inhibitors of normal muscle and joint movement. Pain is the main reason people seek treatment, and should be the first symptom to improve.

PHASE II - Restoring Normal Range Of Motion and Strength

As your pain settles, your therapist will turn their attention to restoring your normal joint alignment and range of motion, including muscle length and resting tension, muscle strength and endurance. Your therapist will assess your muscle recruitment pattern and prescribe the best exercises specific to your needs. They may also start you on a deep neck flexor and scapular/upper thoracic spine strengthening programme to facilitate dynamic control of your neck and head.

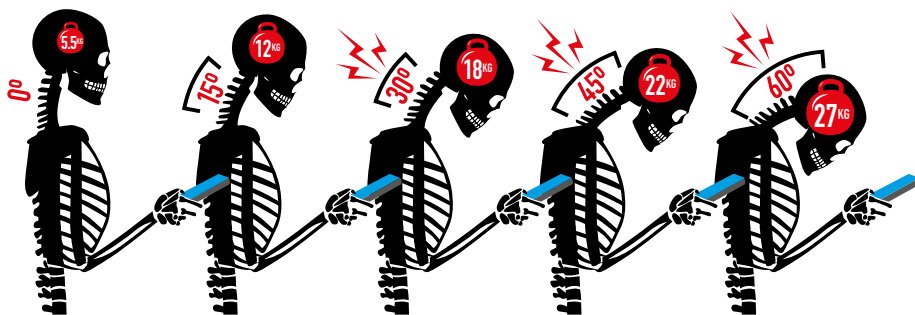
They may also recommend a stretching programme and regular massage for ongoing care.

PHASE III - Restore Full Function

Depending on your lifestyle your physical therapist will tailor your rehabilitation to fit in with work, school or sporting demands.

PHASE IV - Preventing a Recurrence

Aiming to restore and maintain good posture should be the long term goal. It's not easy, because most people aren't prepared to give up their smartphone or tablet, however monitoring hours of use, being aware of your posture while using your device, having regular prompts on your device to remind you of your posture, and becoming stronger in maintaining good neck posture will all help prevent or reduce pain and headaches in the future.



Reference: Cervical headache: an investigation of natural head posture and upper cervical flexor muscle performance. *Cephalalgia*. <https://co-ki.info/2JJDP7u>

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