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Combatting Tech Neck

While not an official medical diagnosis, "tech neck" has become a familiar phrase in today's workplace. As smartphones, laptops and tablets have become everyday tools, people spend more time hunched over screens. The result is a growing number of individuals who spend hours per day behind screens reporting stiffness, discomfort and pain in their neck and shoulders.

This article explains tech neck, why it happens, and how to stay healthy and comfortable while working in a technology-driven world.

What Is Tech Neck?

Tech neck refers to the strain placed on the cervical spine (the part of the spine in the neck) when a person consistently looks down at a device or sits in poor posture while using technology. The human head weighs about 10 to 12 pounds in a neutral, upright position. However, when tilted forward at a 45-degree angle, the position many adopt while scrolling or typing, the effective weight on the neck can increase to nearly 50 pounds. Over time, this added pressure strains muscles, tendons and ligaments, leading to discomfort or pain.

According to the Mayo Clinic, common symptoms of tech neck include the following:

- Stiffness and soreness in the neck and shoulders
- Headaches, particularly tension headaches
- Reduced mobility or difficulty turning the head
- Tingling or numbness in the arms in more severe cases

The causes are not limited to smartphone use. Hours spent at a desk without ergonomic adjustments, craning toward a laptop screen or even lounging on the couch with a tablet can contribute to the problem. Tech neck is essentially a modern posture issue driven by repetitive movements and sustained positions that overload the upper spine.

What Can You Do?

The good news is that tech neck is preventable and manageable. A few small changes in daily habits can make a big difference, so consider these tips:

- **Improve ergonomics**. Ergonomics is all about setting up your environment so it supports your body. Set up your workstation to reduce unnecessary strain. Position your computer monitor so the top of the screen is at or just below eye level. If using a laptop, consider a stand or external keyboard and mouse to bring the screen higher. Sit in a chair that supports your back, with feet flat on the floor and shoulders relaxed. At home, avoid spending hours working from couches or beds, which often encourage poor posture.
- **Follow the 20-20-20 rule**. Breaks are essential. Every 20 minutes, look at something 20 feet away for at least 20 seconds. This not only eases eye strain but also encourages you to reset your posture. Use these pauses to roll your shoulders, stretch your neck and adjust your seating position.
- **Strengthen and stretch**. Encouraging short stretch breaks during the workday can be particularly effective in preventing long-term strain. Simple exercises that counteract the effects of tech neck include the following:
  - **Chin tucks**—Sit or stand tall and gently pull your chin back, creating a "double chin." Hold for five seconds, repeat several times. This strengthens the deep neck muscles that support good posture.
  - **Neck stretches**—Slowly tilt your head toward one shoulder, hold for 15 to 30 seconds, and repeat on the other side. This relieves tightness.
  - **Shoulder blade squeezes**—Sit or stand with your arms at your sides. Squeeze your shoulder blades together for a few seconds, then release. This strengthens upper back muscles that help keep your posture upright.
- **Mind your phone habits**. When checking your phone, bring the device up to your eyes rather than bending your head down. Use voice commands or headphones when possible to reduce the amount of time spent looking downward.

- **Prioritize movement**. Long stretches of sitting can intensify neck and back problems. Whenever possible, stand during calls, walk while brainstorming or simply take a few laps around your workspace. Even five minutes of movement each hour can improve circulation, reset posture and reduce stiffness.
- **Seek professional support**. If symptoms of tech neck persist or worsen, employees should consider contacting a health care provider. Physical therapy, massage or targeted exercise programs can help address more severe discomfort.

Conclusion

Tech neck may be a modern phenomenon, but the solutions are rooted in timeless principles: good posture, regular movement and self-care. Individuals can protect themselves from discomfort and potential long-term issues by making simple adjustments, such as improving workstation ergonomics, practicing stretching and strengthening exercises, and being mindful of device habits.

For more information, consult with a health care professional.

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