

HEALTH MATTERS

Smart habits to **EASE TECH NECK**

ARE YOUR SCREEN HABITS PUTTING A STRAIN ON YOUR SPINE?
TECH NECK HAS BEEN DESCRIBED AS A MODERN EPIDEMIC BUT
MAKING SOME SIMPLE LIFESTYLE CHANGES COULD REDUCE
YOUR RISK AND HELP YOU MANAGE SYMPTOMS.

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Australians spend an average of three hours a day on their phones, a tally that jumps to six hours if you add in laptops and tablets*. But while our devices are smart, the way we use them often isn't. That nagging neck pain after slouching over your phone for hours could be tech neck. Also known as text neck or TNS (tension neck syndrome), tech neck is a modern, musculoskeletal issue generally attributed to poor posture while using technology*.

"Tech neck describes the forward head shift of one's posture," says chiropractor Dr Michael Epstein. "Looking down constantly at mobile devices stretches the ligaments of your cervical (neck) and thoracic (mid-back) spine, changing its shape and contour*."

Constantly tilting your head forward also increases the pressure on your neck. "For every 2.5cm of forward head shift, the effective weight of the head on your shoulders increases by 4.5kg†," Dr Epstein explains. "Imagine holding a bowling ball close to your body, and compare that to holding the ball in front of you with an outstretched arm. The ball is the same weight but feels heavier the further it is in front of you."

Described as a "significant public health concern," by the Australian Chiropractic Association (ACA)*, tech neck may be a consequence of the way we use our devices, but it isn't inevitable. By making simple postural and lifestyle adjustments, and seeking treatment when necessary, you can potentially reduce both the risk and the impact*.



SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

According to specialist musculoskeletal physiotherapist Alicia Rayner, tech neck symptoms often develop gradually and may include neck and shoulder pain, tension headaches and tightness in the ribs or thoracic region, which can make breathing difficult. "Those who spend long hours bent over their devices with their shoulders hanging down and forward and their neck poked forward are most susceptible," she explains. "If you're in a poor posture for three minutes, it's okay. But if you're in that posture for three hours, then sit the same way on the train, then go home and sit on the couch and you're not doing any counteracting movements, you're at greatest risk," she adds.

Bad posture and prolonged use of devices are the main factors contributing to tech neck, but co-factors can include stress, anxiety and fatigue*. "We always look at the overall health of a person," says Alicia. "The person next to you might sit in the exact same posture, but they've just

Try these prevention strategies

Limit screen time. "It's amazing how much time social media chews up," says specialist musculoskeletal physiotherapist Alicia Rayner. The Australian health guidelines recommend no more than 2 hours of recreational screen time per day for children and young people aged 5-17 years-; this doesn't include homework. Adults are recommended to balance out screen time by building more activity and time away from screens into each day*.

Raise your screen to eye level. Use a portable stand for your devices, or "look at your phone while lying flat on your back. Just be careful not to drop it on your nose or mouth," says Dr Epstein.

Take regular breaks from screens, aiming to move every 30 minutes. "Do some stretches or at least check in to see how you're sitting. Don't stay in the same position all the time," advises Alicia.

Practise counteractive movements that

are the opposite to hunching over a device. Alicia suggests trying activities like "planking, cross-training, swimming or using a rowing machine".

Create an ergonomic desk set-up by raising your computer monitor to eye level and choosing a supportive chair. "An inexpensive gaming chair is often best," recommends Dr Epstein.

Step away from your devices and regularly get active, do a yoga class or go for a walk.



*Australian Chiropractic Association national survey, April 2025 - health.gov.au "healthyliving.nsw.gov.au/screen-time
*Musculoskeletal Medicine, February 2024 "Tech Neck, Mayo Clinic Health System, April 2024

been on a holiday and they went to pilates this morning, whereas you've had a poor night's sleep, you've rushed to get to work and you're having technical difficulties, so your system is under the pump."

When should you seek help? "If you feel a twinge in your neck but can move to a comfortable position and the pain goes away, it's probably fine. But if the pain in your neck or shoulders is persistent and repetitive, you should see a health practitioner," advises Alicia.

TEACHING KIDS GOOD TECH HABITS

Noticed your child or teen slouched over a device? Kids are more flexible and can stay in awkward positions for longer because their pain receptors aren't firing like adults' do, explains Alicia. But that doesn't mean it's harmless - poor habits now can lead to bigger problems later*. Her advice? "Lead by example: limit screen time, encourage posture changes and get them moving more often. Ideally, kids should be active throughout the day."

Stretches to relieve neck tension

These simple stretches can be done at your desk or in a chair at home. Alicia recommends doing them daily, or as often as you need to relieve neck and spinal tension.

1

Deep neck flexors

Sit up straight and make the back of your neck long, then tuck your chin in slightly, as if making a double chin. Hold for 30 seconds.

Why it helps: Strengthens deep neck flexors and corrects forward head posture.

2

Side stretch

Hold your hands on top of your head with elbows wide. Bend over to one side, reaching the opposite elbow towards the roof. Hold for 20 seconds per side.

Why it helps: Relieves stiffness and tension in the neck and shoulders and improves flexibility.

3

Upper thoracic extension

Hold your hands behind your head with your elbows pointing forward. Lean over the back of the chair, keeping elbows tucked in. Gently rock back and forth over the chair for 30 seconds.

Why it helps: Improves posture and reduces upper back stiffness.

4

Glute stretch

Bend one leg and place your foot on the opposite knee. Gently lean towards the foot and hold for 30 seconds. Repeat on the opposite leg.

Why it helps: Maintaining hip flexibility can reduce the tightness in your lower and upper back. 

