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Well

Text Neck, Pinkie Pain and Other Ways Phones Can Wreck Our Bodies

Health providers say they are seeing more patients than ever with pain and joint ailments in their hands, necks, shoulders and upper backs — and that mobile phones are most likely playing a part.

By **Melinda Wenner Moyer**

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A few years ago, my best friend texted me to confess that she was worried about her texting. Her hands and fingers ached throughout the day, and the pain worsened when she used her smartphone. Could our incessant texting about parenting and politics be the culprit?

There isn't much research yet on the effects that smartphone use can have on the body. "We don't know a lot," said Jessica B. Schwartz, a physical therapist based in New York and a spokeswoman for the American Physical Therapy Association. But she and the doctors I spoke with said they were seeing more patients than ever with pain as well as joint and soft tissue ailments such as tendinitis in their fingers, thumbs, wrists, elbows, necks, shoulders and upper backs — and that mobile phones were most likely playing a part.

When we text friends or browse the internet on our phones, we often use our muscles and joints in ways that strain them, Dr. Schwartz said. Looking down at our phones, as well as holding them in our hands with our wrists flexed as we scroll or text, require our joints and muscles to do things they did not evolve to do: stay in the same position for too long, hold too much weight and move repeatedly across a short range of motion.

These positions and movements can put “undue forces” on joints, muscles, tendons and ligaments “that just aren’t used to being held in that position for so long,” said Dr. Renee Enriquez, a physical medicine and rehabilitation specialist at UT Southwestern Medical Center. Over time, these actions can cause inflammation, leading to pain and other problems, she said.

Not all doctors are aware of these risks. When my friend saw her general practitioner about her hand pain, she underwent X-rays and blood tests and was told that she didn’t have arthritis. When she asked whether her smartphone could be causing the pain, her doctor said it was unlikely. She then saw another doctor, who ruled out carpal tunnel syndrome, and finally an orthopedic hand specialist, who laughed and said no when she asked — again — if her phone might be inciting her pain.

Yet Dr. Schwartz said that my friend’s symptoms were consistent with tendinitis — inflammation of the thick cords called tendons that attach muscle to bone — or tenosynovitis, inflammation of the lining of the sheath that surrounds the tendons. Studies have linked tenosynovitis of the thumb, which is called De Quervain’s tenosynovitis, to frequent smartphone use. Phone use could also worsen symptoms among people who already have arthritis. She told me that while so-called smartphone pinkie isn’t an established condition, it’s possible that using your pinkie to hold the weight of your phone could cause problems over time.

Aches and pains to look out for

In addition to aches that could stem from inflammation in ligaments, joints, muscles, tendons and their sheaths, people can experience acute smartphone injuries. Dr. Jennifer Moriatis Wolf, an orthopedic hand surgeon at the University of

Chicago Medicine, said she had seen patients who sprained their thumbs because they gripped their phones so hard.

Frequent phone use can also affect our nerves. When we hold our phones in front of us with our elbows bent, we compress the ulnar nerve, which runs from the neck to the hand. This constriction can cause numbness and weakness in the pinkie and ring fingers, Dr. Schwartz said.

More generally, when any muscles, tendons or ligaments become inflamed through smartphone use, they can swell, which squeezes the nerves that run through them and leads to pain or numbness, Dr. Enriquez said. Mobile phone use could also exacerbate pre-existing nerve issues, such as carpal tunnel syndrome, Dr. Wolf added. Then there's the strain that smartphones can put on our eyes and the disruption that blue light can cause to our sleep cycles.

“Text neck” is another term you might have heard. Consider what happens when you hunch over to look at your phone: Compared with holding your head upright, this bent-over position increases the force on your neck muscles and cervical spine by a factor of four or five, said Dr. Jason M. Cuéllar, an orthopedic spine specialist at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles and JFK North Hospital in West Palm Beach, Fla. This excess force, he said, can weaken the ligaments in the spinal column over time and cause pain. A 2017 study found a link between texting and sustained neck, shoulder and upper back pain, although other studies have not found a connection.

EDITORS' PICKS

This Trump Play in London Is a Comedy. Unless You're American.

May 5, 2022

Is the Dirty Shirley

May 5, 2022

The cervical spines of some young patients Dr. Cuéllar sees are also bent in abnormal ways. This could be related to frequent smartphone use, too, he said, and may increase the risk of back problems. “What we think that does is it leads to

accelerated disc degeneration,” he said, referring to the deterioration of the spinal discs, small shock absorbers that sit between the vertebrae to help us move comfortably. “We’re seeing more younger people, in their 20s, often 30s, for cervical spine problems.”

How to lessen the strain

What should you do if your phone is causing you pain — or if you’re worried it could eventually? Although my friend’s physicians pooh-poohed the idea that her phone had anything to do with her aching hands, she eventually got rid of her large smartphone and bought a smaller one to see if that would help. She also began using a voice-to-text option to reduce the strain on her fingers. Her pain quickly dissipated.

Dr. Schwartz agreed that downsizing to a smaller, lighter phone could be a good idea if you have small hands and that the voice-to-text tool can ease pain by reducing strain on your fingers. She and Dr. Enriquez recommended phone grips and stands like those made by PopSocket and Moft, too, which can take much of the strain of holding a phone off fingers and thumbs. Dr. Cuéllar said it could be helpful to use a stand that holds your phone at eye level, so you’re not straining your neck to see it.

If you’re experiencing a lot of pain, it’s a good idea to see a physical therapist or a doctor, such as an orthopedist or a physical medicine specialist, as they can recommend treatments and stretches, Dr. Schwartz said. “If you catch these things early, they don’t tend to become chronic,” she said.

But of course, if something causes you pain, the simplest solution is to stop doing it so much. In other words, Dr. Wolf said, “the best advice would be: Put down your phone.”

That steady dusting of pollen

Are your allergies especially bad this year? Pollen season is growing longer and more intense with climate change, so you’re not alone if you have incessant sniffles. Lifestyle changes, medications and at-home treatments like nasal irrigation can

help.

Read more:

Allergy Season Is About to Get Worse. Here's How to Prepare.

Eating for brain health

You may have noticed buzzy “brain food” claims scattered across online health articles and social media feeds. But can certain foods or diets really stave off or prevent dementia? Experts say that while nutrition studies are notoriously challenging to carry out, there is a compelling and ever-growing body of research that does suggest that some foods and diets may offer real benefits to an aging brain.

Read more:

Can Certain Foods Really Stave Off Dementia?

So, this is 13

The headlines seem to scream at us: Teenage anxiety is on the rise. Visits to the E.R. are surging. Instagram might be harming girls' body images. Teen girls are developing tics on TikTok. But what is it actually like to be a young teenager with a phone, living at an age when self-esteem is at its most fragile, amid an ongoing pandemic?

Do you have a 13-year-old, or know someone turning 13 soon, who might want to share their experiences — the ups and downs, the awkward moments, the things older people just don't get?

Fill out our entry form:

Tell Us: What Is It Like to Be 13 Years Old?

The Week in Well

Here are some stories you don't want to miss:

- In a heartbreaking essay, Jennifer Spitzer writes that texting is no way to say goodbye to her dying mother.
- Catherine Pearson details what hepatitis symptoms look like in children after the C.D.C. flagged unexplained clusters of liver inflammation.
- In Ask Well, Alice Callahan answers a reader's question: Why do carbs and sugar give me headaches? She also digs into a second topic this week: How long does menopause last?
- Rachel E. Gross asks whether probiotics can improve vaginal health.
- Erik Vance offers a beginner's guide to bouldering.
- And of course, we've got the Weekly Health Quiz.

Let's keep the conversation going. Follow me on Twitter for daily check-ins, or write to me at well_newsletter@nytimes.com.

Stay well!