

Is Your iPad Causing Your Chronic Pain?

Can't live without your tablet, laptop, or smartphone? These gadgets may be convenient, but for many, they may also be the source of chronic pain.

By Wyatt Myers Medically reviewed by Niya Jones, MD, MPH

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Michele Rouse, a 30-year-old billing manager in Rockville, Md., isn't all that different from a lot of people fond of electronic gadgets. She loves her smartphone, adores her iPad, worships her laptop, and seems to spend almost all of her waking hours on one or another of them.

But about two years ago, her chronic use of electronic devices turned into another type of chronic problem — pain. "It started out as **headaches** that became more and more severe over time," Rouse recalls. "Eventually, it turned into shoulder pain that became so bad that I had trouble using my arm."

Rouse is one of a growing number of Americans who have developed chronic pain as a result of using smartphones, iPads, and other trendy electronic devices. "Surprise! Your keyboard may be the most dangerous part of your office," notes Moshe Lewis, MD, a pain management specialist in private practice in Redwood City, Calif. "Computer use is one of the leading causes of office-related repetitive strain injuries (RSIs)."

Fortunately, Rouse was able to get a handle on her computer- and smartphone-related pain. By modifying the way she uses her electronic devices, Rouse has kept her pain at bay.

If you experience similar pain while using smartphones, iPads, or computers, take a look at the specific problems these devices can cause and how you too, can solve them.

Desktop Computers: Shoulder and Neck Pain

If your desktop computer is causing you pain, then it is probably set up in a way that strains your muscles, explains Jacob Teitelbaum, MD, director of the Fibromyalgia and Fatigue Centers, Inc., and author of *Pain Free 1-2-3 — A Proven Program for Eliminating Chronic Pain Now*. "Classically, shoulder and **neck pain** are especially problematic if people are not keeping their wrists and elbows resting on a stable surface," he says. "Because of this, it is important to have a proper wrist support, and it is helpful to use a chair where your elbows are on the armrests." Other steps to help prevent pain while working at a desktop computer include use of an **ergonomic** keyboard and placing the monitor slightly below eye level to prevent neck strain.

Laptops: Stress on Your Wrists and Neck

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You may have noticed that the term "laptop" is slowly being phased out in favor of "notebook." That, explains Dr. Lewis, might help eliminate part of the problem with these handy portable computers. "Your lap is a terrible surface for a portable

computer," he says. "Not only does your lap overheat a computer, but the hip-height keyboard and screen puts strain on your wrists and your neck. Your lap is less steady than a table, which also makes for high-stress typing."

In addition to using a table instead of your lap, Lewis has these suggestions to help eliminate problems with portables. "To reduce risks for repetitive strain injury, try elevating the computer to eye-level and connecting an external keyboard to your laptop," he says. "This will allow you to use the computer as comfortably and ergonomically as you might use a desktop." Lewis also warns that if you are at risk for RSIs, it may be best to avoid buying an ultra-compact netbook. "Netbooks have keyboards that are smaller than regular laptops, and this can increase the likelihood of typing with incorrect posture."

Tablets: Strain on Fingers and Hands

Tablets like Apple's iPad are all the rage, but these cool new toys are not without their chronic pain risks. "Prolonged use of tablet computers can cause different forms of repetitive strain injuries to the fingers and hands," notes John L. Pappas, MD, the medical director for the Beaumont Centers for Pain Medicine in Royal Oak, Mich. "Good posture and frequent, short breaks can help minimize these symptoms."

If you are using your iPad or other tablet like a little computer, Lewis says you can avoid problems by following the same protocols suggested for a laptop: Buy the right accessories to set the screen at a comfortable working height and use an external keyboard.

Smartphones: Thumb and Finger Injuries

Smartphones are arguably the most widespread phenomenon of recent years and a potential cause of **chronic pain**. "Texting and phone browsing have become key parts of professional communication, and they have simultaneously become a frequent source of repetitive strain injuries," says Lewis. "Smartphones tend to be heavier than regular cell phones. This extra weight can reduce blood flow to the thumbs when using the phone, causing thumb injuries and aggravating carpal tunnel syndrome. Android phones and iPhones increase your risk for the very reasons they make such enticing gadgets — the touchscreen and added functionality makes them more useful, and thus they tend to keep your fingers active when you might otherwise be still."

Lewis suggests a few simple solutions to curb the chronic pain related to smartphones. "You should use both thumbs when texting, and take breaks in between writing messages," he says. And Lewis has a radical suggestion for those who just can't stop texting and emailing from their smartphones: "If you find your hands truly in need of a rest, try an old-fashioned remedy: Use your phone to talk instead of type."

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