



PREVENT PAIN



IF YOU HAVE A SMART PHONE, you may have spent hours discovering all the things you can do with it. But you may also have discovered its downside: repetitive movements of your shoulders, neck, elbows, and thumbs can create pain and even structural changes in your joints, muscles, tendons, and nails in addition to straining your eyes.

By using your smart phone with some modifications, you can avoid or decrease discomfort or pain. The following tips were created by occupational therapy practitioners who specialize in hand therapy and ergonomics.

Possible condition...

What you can do...

What an occupational therapy practitioner can do...

Smart Phone Thumb

Symptoms may include discomfort or pain in the wrist and thumb when bending either toward the small finger. You may also have a dull aching pain in the base of your thumb or pain and snapping in your thumb when you bend and straighten it.

Cause: Repeatedly pressing the small keyboard and sustained, awkward positioning of your hands and thumbs while typing.

- Use one hand to secure the phone and use the index finger of your other hand to type.
- Keep your messages short, and use word prediction, abbreviations, and pre-typed messages whenever possible.
- Avoid multiple Internet searches and limit your time spent playing games using a small keyboard. If feasible, use a plug in keyboard to increase the size of the keyboard and to use multiple fingers.
- Limit your time using thumb keyboards each day. Be selective in returning e-mails and text messages using your smart phone.
- If you feel discomfort or pain, stop and rest your hands. Gently stretch your thumbs, fingers, and wrists.
- Use ice packs daily as soon as discomfort or pain appears, to reduce inflammation.

- Provide education on the movements that caused the discomfort or pain and recommend ergonomic strategies to use the phone differently to prevent further issues. Provide splinting as needed to relieve symptoms and enable the tissues to heal. Provide individualized hand therapy to treat the injury and to avoid further injury, while suggesting other ways to use the phone effectively.

Cell Phone Elbow

Symptoms include tingling and numbness into your little finger and possible weakness of your hand.

Cause: Continually bending your elbow to hold the phone to your ear.

- Use the speakerphone feature or hands-free ear devices when feasible to avoid bending your elbow.
- Change hands frequently during extended conversations without a hands-free device.

- Recommend ergonomic strategies and equipment for using your phone, as well as ways to help the elbow heal and not further injure it during other activities.
- Provide a splint so you aren't able to reinjure your elbow while it's healing.

Possible condition...

What you can do...

What an occupational therapy practitioner can do...

Cell Phone Neck

Symptoms include muscle pain and spasms in your neck and shoulders, with possible tingling and numbness into your arms

Cause: Prolonged head tilting and raising your shoulder to your ear to secure the phone while talking.

- Do not cradle the phone between your neck and shoulder. Use the speakerphone feature or hands-free ear devices.

- Recommend equipment and other ways to use your phone hands free. Provide ways to reduce spasms in your neck and shoulders. Use heat, massage, therapeutic activities, and stretching techniques to reduce pain and increase healing. Recommend ways to avoid reinjury during other activities.

PDA Nails

Symptoms include misshapen and ridged thumb nails.

Cause: Continually pressing the keypad with your fingertips, which puts pressure on the nail bed.

- Hold the phone in one hand and type with the other. Keep your nails short and use the fleshy pad of your index finger—not your fingertip—to type.

- Recommend alternate equipment for typing as well as ways to avoid further injury.

Cellular Blindness

Symptoms include dry eyes.

Cause: Looking at a small screen for a long time.

- Use the proper corrective lenses, increase the font size and contrast, and use an easy-to-read font (e.g., Arial, Times Roman) without italics. Purchase a phone with the largest screen possible.
- Every 20 minutes, look at an object at least 20 feet away to refocus your eyes, and be sure to blink regularly to moisten your eyes. Avoid using a phone with a small screen as your primary tool for Internet searches, e-mails, and texts.

- Recommend and work with an ophthalmologist or optometrist if necessary. Provide individualized recommendations for ways to use your phone without straining your eyes.

Smart Phone Fog

Symptoms include putting yourself and others in danger by using your smart phone while driving or walking.

- Do not use your smart phone for texting while walking or driving. Texting while walking can lead to falling, being hit by a car, etc. If you are talking while walking, be aware of your surroundings, including cars, tripping hazards, etc. If you are talking while driving, use a hands-free device.

- Provide therapy caused by injuries sustained when not paying attention.

Need More Information?

If discomfort, pain, or tingling occurs or persists despite the recommendations outlined above, consult your physician and request an occupational therapy evaluation. Occupational therapy practitioners are available through most hospitals, community clinics, and medical centers. You can find additional information through the American Occupational Therapy Association at www.aota.org.

Occupational therapy is a skilled health, rehabilitation, and educational service that helps people across the lifespan participate in the things they want and need to do through the therapeutic use of everyday activities (occupations). It is covered by private insurance, Medicare, Medicaid, workers' compensation, vocational programs, behavioral health programs, early intervention, and school programs. Services also may be covered through Social Security, state mental health agencies or those serving individuals with intellectual impairment, health and human services agencies, private foundations, and grants. Many providers accept private payments.

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