

Cripples by Thirty?

Don't Be a Victim of Bad Posture Like Me

by Jeffrey Race

This is not a happy story. I began to use computers at the age of 39. Twenty years later, according to my doctor, my neck structure is permanently injured by bad usage habits I didn't even know or care about, because I was asymptomatic until recently. Don't let this happen to you, and especially don't let it happen to your offspring.

My daughter entered the computer world at the age of nine, heading to be a cripple at thirty. To prevent this I scared her by showing her the accompanying X-ray image of my own damaged neck. This worked, at least to the extent that she no longer argues back when urged to sit properly and to straighten her neck.

Surprise Attack

I am very health-conscious in my personal habits but that didn't suffice. One day recently while swimming on my back I elevated my neck a bit to keep water out of my nose. Upon finishing twenty laps and exiting the pool, I became dizzy, with a bad headache—sensations I never feel. Something was very wrong, and I was afraid to drive.

Copyright © 2002 by Jeffrey Race



Diagnosis

The dizziness dissipated but the headache remained all day and into the next, when I sought medical care. An X-ray revealed "cervical spondylosis with narrowing of joint space of C5-6"—you can see how my disks have collapsed at the location of the arrow. This suggests years of compressive force, most likely in my case from computer usage with a craned neck. Trauma or over-

stress (backstroking as I did) can cause a sudden appearance of symptoms.

My physician advised that this form of skeletal breakdown is increasingly common—and incurable. He sees it often in professionals like myself, and perhaps like you. To some extent it occurs naturally but it is accelerated by abuse.

Treatment

My doctor prescribed a relaxant so that my neck muscles could resume properly supporting my disks, as well as anti-vertigo medication and a pain-killer. After about a week I began to feel comfortable, but the big question in my mind was how to prevent a recurrence of the attack and more importantly how to prevent further deterioration of my own body and of those in my care.

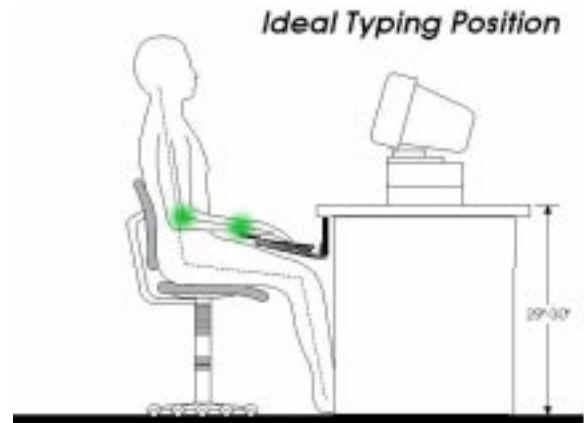
A specialist recommended exercising my neck many times daily to slow (*not stop*) degeneration. It turns out one can build up muscles by rotating one's head to one side, blocking the rotation with the hand, and holding in this blocked and tensed position for say 20 seconds to stress the muscles. Repeat in the opposite direction. Then dip your neck and relax. Continue repeating this stress maneuver—the perfect exercise behind the wheel in Bangkok traffic jams.

Don't Become a Victim Like Me

My situation was aggravated by my decision years ago to eliminate desktop computers from my life, using only notebook machines ever since. It turns out that notebook computers are inherently anti-ergonomic for long-term use as they come out of the box: if the screen is at the right height, the keyboard is malpositioned and vice versa. This is what injured me. The solution is to

elevate the screen and to use an external keyboard during prolonged sessions. I now have a superb clackety-clack external IBM keyboard, better than the one on my notebook computer itself.

Refer to the three accompanying drawings illustrating ideal and risky computing postures, courtesy of Professor Alan Hedge of Cornell.



There are many simple but essential details to prevent musculo-skeletal injury from computer use, relating to proper position of neck, wrists, back and feet. They are too extensive to repeat here but are readily available in the Resources box. Use them, use them for your children, and *make sure your children's school is following the indicated guidelines.*



RESOURCES

This article "Cripples by Thirty?" is available for download at:

<<http://www.camblab.com/nugget/nugget.htm>>

Professor Hedge's comprehensive site on safe computing habits:

<<http://ergo.human.cornell.edu/ergoguide.html>>

A site focussed on proper computer usage by children, with lots of guidance for school administrators:

<<http://orosha.org/cergos/>>

Registration and fee required, but a valuable resource for school administrators:

<<http://query.nytimes.com/search/abstract?res=F30D16FF3A5F0C778CDDA80894D9404482>>

Details on cervical spondylosis:

<<http://www.healthcentral.com/mhc/top/000436.cfm>>