

Protect Hands From Digital Distress



How often do you text? Type? Play video games? Tap your iPhone? These tools have become staples in society, but they've also given us new ways to use and abuse our hands.

Your hand is a delicate network of muscles, joints and tendons. And while your paws may be powerful, they're also prone to overuse injuries. An overuse injury is just what it sounds like—pain, soreness or inflammation that occurs when you do a particular motion over and over again.

You've probably heard of writer's cramp, when the hand seizes up from too much scribbling or typing, but there are other problems that could develop if you text, type or toggle too much.

To ward off injury, take a few moments each day to stretch your hands and arms. The gentle movements can release tension and ease strained muscles. Plus, it's a quick way to reen-

ergize! The American Society of Hand Therapists suggests these simple stretches to keep texting injuries at bay:

- Fold your hands together and turn your palms away from your body as you extend your arms forward. You should feel a stretch all the way from your shoulders to your fingers. Hold for 10 seconds and repeat eight times.
- Fold your hands together and turn your palms away from your body, but this time extend your arms overhead. You should feel the stretch in your upper torso and shoulders to hand. Hold for 10 seconds and repeat eight times.
- Place your hand just above the back of the elbow and gently push your elbow across your chest toward the opposite shoulder. This is a stretch for the upper back and shoulder. Stretch both the right and left arms. Hold for 10 seconds and repeat eight times.
- Raise one arm overhead. Bend the elbow. Place the opposite hand on the bent elbow

and gently push the elbow back further. This is a stretch for the triceps (muscle on the back of the upper arm). Stretch both the right and left arms. Hold for 10 seconds and repeat eight times.

- Extend an arm in front of you, making sure the elbow is completely straight. With your palm down, take the opposite hand and bend the hand down toward the floor. Then turn the palm up, and stretch the hand up toward your body. This stretches the forearm and wrist muscles. Hold for 10 seconds and repeat eight times.
- Open up hands and spread the fingers as far as possible. Hold for 10 seconds and repeat eight times.
- Sometimes, gentle strengthening exercises may be used to complement these stretches, to rebalance the muscles in the hands and arms, and prevent problems. Consult with a hand therapist for appropriate exercises.

These stretches are not intended to cause pain, so if you feel any discomfort during a stretch, stop immediately.

In addition to stretching, give your hands a rest from time to time. Turn off your BlackBerry, shut down the Xbox and spend an hour or two playing soccer or walking through a park. Handheld devices may be convenient, but they're not worth compromising your health. ■

This Patient Handout uses information from the American Society of Hand Therapists' National Consumer Education Alert on Heavy Use of Handheld Electronic Devices. Available online at http://www.asht.org/professionals/handheld_electronics_release.doc

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