In and around the machine

Here's a host of handy products, from monitor to encryption aid

to mouse / Simson L. Garfinkel

PROBABLY THE MOST dangerous thing you can do with your computer is unpack the monitor – especially if you have one of those big 17- or 21-inch monitors designed to make things easy on your eyes.

Big monitors are heavy and unwieldy, putting you at risk of seriously damaging your back. Some companies have even started printing labels on their monitor boxes warning you to avoid lifting the monitor by yourself.

Panasonic is taking a different approach. The company's new PanaSync SL70 monitor packs a 17-inch CRT (cathode ray tube) into a package that has the bulk and size of a 15-inch monitor. Although it still weighs a hefty 38 pounds, I didn't strain my back carrying it from room to room, as I would have with a conventional 55-pound, 17-inch screen.

Put the SL70 on your desk and you are in for another pleasant surprise: This monitor is only 15 inches deep. As a result, it takes up considerably less desk space than the conventional 17-inch screen – and less than many 15-inch screens.

The monitor's electronics are pretty impressive as well. The SL70 has a sharp, crisp display. And at 1280 by 1024 pixels, the monitor could handle a refresh frequency of 72 Hz, which made the display look rock-solid.

My only complaint with the SL70 is the cost. At a $599 estimated street price, it's nearly $100 more than other, bulkier 17-inch monitors. But this is one time some people probably won't mind spending more for less.

Repetitive strain gain

Do your fingers hurt from clicking the mouse? If so, you're not alone. Mouse clicking is a leading cause of repetitive strain injuries (RSIs).

MouseTool is a nifty program for Windows 95 that clicks the mouse for you. I was skeptical at first. But the program works as advertised. MouseTool watches your computer while you move the mouse, then generates a mouse-click in software when the mouse stops moving. To be sure, it takes a while to adjust to this new behavior. But once you do, the reward can be significant. Mouse-Tool also has a timer that reminds you to take a break from typing every 30 minutes.

Although I like the idea of MouseTool a great deal, the current program needs a bit of work. Sometimes, by habit, I clicked the mouse anyway, and MouseTool clicked again. It's also pretty difficult to double-click or click-and-drag while the program is running. Right now, I am just using the timer feature.

You can download MouseTool from www.mousetool.com; the program offers a 30-day free trial, then costs $19.95 to register.

WorkPace is a vastly more sophisticated typing-timer program. This program watches the intensity of your keystrokes and offers a better approach than the timer MouseTool uses. WorkPace also knows about micro-pauses, a relatively new idea among RSI practitioners. An alternative to a five-minute break every 30 minutes, a micro-pause is a five-second break every minute or so. The program is free for one month there-after. It is available at www.work-pace.com.

For their eyes only

If you want to send e-mail that can't be read by anybody other than the intended recipient, you've got to use encryption. Until recently, there were two choices: Pretty Good Privacy, a widely used piece of "free" software now being sold for $39.95 by Network Associates ($99 for the "business edition"), with a so-called international version that can be downloaded free from www.pgpi.com/; or the S/MIME encryption system that's built in to programs such as Netscape Communicator and Outlook Express.

SynData is challenging these companies with a new e-mail encryption program called Syn-Crypt. Priced at $49.95, SynCrypt works through the Windows clipboard. You select the data you want to encrypt, click a button, and the data disappears, reappearing encrypted. The program has features for sending your Syn-Crypt key to other users – which is important, since SynCrypt's data formats are incompatible with both PGP and S/MIME.

The cut-and-paste approach does have its advantages. "We've enabled a user to encrypt a mail message inside of AOL and decrypt it using HotMail, or Outlook, or Eudora," says David Krane, the company's director of marketing. No other encryption package can make that claim.

But I generally found Syn-Crypt harder to use than its competitors. And the program itself is unpolished. A 16-bit application cobbled together from VisualBasic and C++, the program occasionally froze while I was using it. SynData plans to release a 32-bit version. You can find out more at www.syndata.com/.

Better business

The last time I bought a compact disc over the Internet, I was asked to fill out a survey rating my satisfaction with the experience. The survey, it turns out, was run by an independent third party called BizRate (www.bizrate.com). At this site you'll learn which of the on-line merchants are doing well by their customers and which aren't. You'll also see, at a glance, which have secure ordering, shopping-cart software, live customer assistance, and other services. BizRate is free to both consumers and merchants.