

Some RSI advice can be pain

Information abounds on treating typing-related injuries, but much of it is bad / **Simson L. Garfinkel**

THOSE TERRIBLE pains started up again last week. My fingers tingle, then feel numb. My fingers ache. I went to see my family doctor and she diagnosed me with carpal tunnel syndrome. She suggested I wear wrist splints, take anti-inflammatory drugs, and stay away from the computer.

Typing-related injuries are increasingly common among computer users. The special chairs and ergonomic keyboards are simply no match for the abuse that more and more people are inflicting upon their bodies. Unfortunately, there is a lot of bad information about dealing with the resulting repetitive strain injuries. Even worse, a lot of the information that's correct is incomplete.

A few weeks ago, I wrote that if you have pains in your hands, it's a good idea to take frequent breaks and wrap your hands in ice packs to treat the swelling. I should have added that it is important to let your hands warm up before you start typing again. "Ice numbs the area and tightens tendons," writes Joshua Goodman, a graduate student at Harvard and vice president of Harvard RSI Action, the university's branch of the local RSI prevention and advocacy group. "This tendon tightening leads to increased risk of damage;

the numbing means the damage is less likely to be felt. Most involved in RSI prevention strongly recommend that if ice is used to reduce RSI symptoms, no work be done until the area is warmed again." (RSI Action can be reached at 776-2777.)

Dr. David Diamond, who practices occupational medicine at the MIT Medical Center, wrote in to say that "frequent breaks" really mean you should stop typing for 30 seconds every five to eight minutes. "Frequent microbreaks are critical," he wrote, adding that most of the 800 patients he has treated for hand problems over the years fail to pace themselves properly.

On Tuesday I visited Diamond in his office. Besides pacing, he says there are three other things to keep in mind: position, typing techniques, and exercise.

A lot of printed materials I've seen say that you should sit up straight in your chair when you are typing and that your arms should be parallel to the ground. That's just wrong, says Diamond. "Don't fight gravity, and don't hold your joints in extreme extension. Lean into your seat. Distribute your body weight into the back, butt, and feet."

For typing technique, Diamond says typists should avoid pounding the keyboard. Instead of stretching your fingers to reach those difficult keys, you should

move your entire hand. Certain combinations, like hitting the control key with your left pinky and the "a" with your left ring finger, are especially bad. Diamond doesn't like wrist pads because they encourage people to plant their hands at the base of the keyboard and let their fingers do all the work.

Exercise is also an important part of any treatment program. "Blood flow helps them recover," he says. But he advises people to avoid racket sports, volleyball, basketball, and weight lifting — all of which could exacerbate an existing injury.

Although Diamond didn't give me a physical examination, he says it's highly unlikely I actually have carpal tunnel syndrome. "Almost no one has carpal tunnel syndrome from" keyboarding, he says. Instead, most people have some other problem such as thoracic outlet syndrome or some form of tendinitis. The people who

really get CTS are meat cutters or people who use jackhammers.

Gary Newman, a nurse practitioner with Harvard Pilgrim Health Care who treats hand problems, agrees with Diamond. "It's not unusual for somebody to be referred for carpal tunnel syndrome and it is really tendinitis."

Both Diamond and Newman say anti-inflammatory drugs don't seem to be all that helpful in treating these injuries. "Taking an anti-inflammatory doesn't prevent the injury, it just prevents awareness of the injury," Diamond says.

Splints can be another problem. Many of the splints sold in drugstores often give too much of a tilt to the hand. "Buyer beware," says Newman.

Unless you have the particular injury for which the splint was designed, they can do more harm than good. Instead of a splint, Diamond recommends using a Neoprene Universal Wrist Wrap manufactured by Smith & Nephew (800-558-8633).

It's hard to know where to turn to get good information or treatment for RSI problems. My

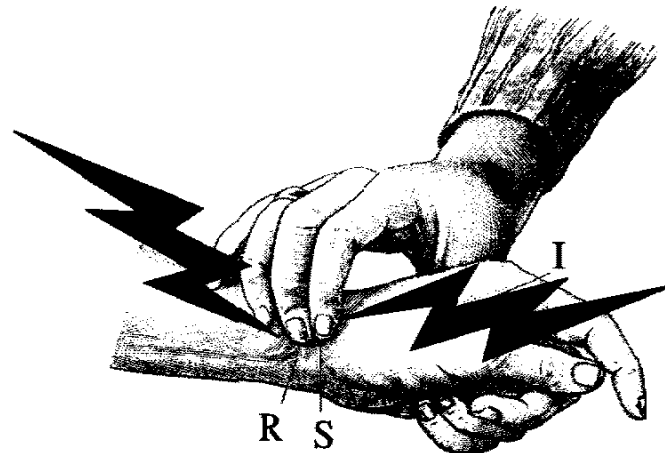
physician referred me to an orthopedic surgeon. But surgeons aren't accustomed to dealing with long, drawn-out problems — they want to cut. Diamond says many people would be better off seeing a physiatrist, although there are few in the Boston area.

If you can still navigate a Web browser, two excellent Internet sites for RSI problems are <http://web.mit.edu/at/c/www/rsi/mitrsi.html> at MIT and <http://www.eecs.harvard.edu/rsi> at Harvard. And everybody I spoke with recommended the book "Repetitive Strain Injury," by Dr. Emil Pascarelli and Deborah Quilter.

Because I caught my problem early, I hope to escape the worst of the pain debilitation. Nevertheless, I've dramatically cut back on my typing — mostly by using Dragon Dictate, a voice-recognition system available for Windows 95.

Dragon Software actually makes two kinds of voice-recognition programs. The older system, Dragon Dictate (\$79), requires that you pause between every word. The newer system, Dragon Naturally Speaking Personal (\$149), lets you speak in your natural voice. Unfortunately, Naturally Speaking only works with the company's own special word processor. Naturally Speaking is also more picky about what kind of sound card you have: It doesn't work with my Sony VAIO laptop. For these reasons, I've been sticking with Dragon Dictate. The company is working on a new version of Naturally Speaking that solves these problems.

In the meantime, I'm off to the gym.



Technology writer Simson L. Garfinkel can be reached at plugged-in@simson.net