

Your Smart Phone Could Be Rapidly Aging Your Spine

Chances are that you probably haven't given much thought to how your neck and back are faring in the era of the smart phone, but studies show that you most certainly should. It's practically a reflex these days to pull out our smart phones when we're waiting for a curbside pick-up, buying time for TV commercials to end, or waiting at the doctor's office. And while it's great that we rarely need to venture beyond our pockets for entertainment, our bodies are beginning to retaliate—and mourn the pre-texting days.

So, what exactly are these contemporary conveniences doing to our bodies? A surgeon-led study that published in *Surgical Technology International* assessed what impact surgeons' head and neck posture during surgery—a posture similar to that of smart-phone texters—has on their cervical spines. With each degree that our heads flex forward (as we stare at a screen below eye level), the strain on our spines dramatically increases. When an adult head (that weighs 10 to 12 pounds in the neutral position) tilts forward at 30 degrees, the weight seen by the spine climbs to a staggering 40 pounds, according to the study.

How pervasive of a problem is this? According to the study, the average person spends 14 to 28 hours each week with their heads tilted over a laptop, smart phone or similar device. Over the course of a year, that adds up to 700 to 1400 hours of strain and stress on our spines. As a result, the number of people dealing with headaches, achy necks and shoulders and other associated pain has skyrocketed. Trained to address postural changes and functional declines, physical therapists are well-versed in treating this modern-day phenomenon, widely known as “text neck.”

Over time, this type of poor posture can have a cumulative effect, leading to spine degeneration, pinched nerves and muscle strains. Scheduling an appointment with a physical therapist can help people learn how to interact with their devices without harming their spines. The PT will prescribe an at-home program that includes strategies and exercises that focus on preserving the spine and preventing long-term damage. A doctor's prescription is not required for physical therapy treatment, which means you can start feeling better right away and learn how to avoid aches, pains or injury to your spine from “text neck.”

Exercise is an important part of taking care of our spines as we age, but what we do when we're not in motion matters, too. So next time you pick up your smart phone or curl up with your e-reader, do a quick check of your head and neck posture. Your body will thank you for years to come.