

Thumb pain: BlackBerry strain?

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Don't know what "BlackBerry Thumb" is? Consult the dictionary, which recently added the newly coined word:

"BlackBerry Thumb: An injury to the thumb caused by repeatedly pressing the keypad on a BlackBerry handheld device." - Macmillan English Dictionary

This new ailment, which has been increasingly plaguing people that use handheld BlackBerry, Treo and Sidekick devices (as well as those who frequently send text messages from their mobile phones) was first reported in the UK, but has now come across the pond to the U.S.

These modern PDAs, or personal digital assistant devices, combine the convenience of having a mobile phone with amenities like wireless Internet access, e-mail and text messaging.

Users type with their thumbs on a small keypad that's not much larger than one found on a cell phone. It is this micro-typing that causes repetitive stress injury.

What Are The Symptoms?

People that use small electronic gadgets frequently often complain of symptoms such as muscle spasms and soreness in the thumb and hand, said Suzanne Robben Brown, M.P.H., P.T., chair of the physical therapy department at Still University in Mesa, Ariz.

"All of the tendons and the muscles of the thumb are very short muscles," she explained. "When you require them to make very fine repetitive movements, that is what irritates [them]."

"They're doing 10 times the stress on the thumb" than if they utilized all fingers on a full-size keyboard, Brown said. "This overuse makes it inflamed and very sore."

Nintendonitis ... Sound Familiar?

"BlackBerry Thumb" isn't a new malady, either. It just has a new name for an old ailment.

Similar hand injuries have also resulted from video game playing. In the 1990s, an ailment known as "Nintendonitis" was coined, based on excessive Nintendo use. Its precursor, "Tetwrist," was first identified in the 1980s following user complaints of wrist soreness after playing the Tetris video arcade game.

The use of practically any small, handheld device can put strain on the hands that puts digits at risk for muscle spasms and soreness.

Experts say the thumb is set apart from the other fingers for a reason. The thumbs are the least dexterous digits and were never intended to work as hard - or as often - as daily text-messagers demand.

When In Pain, The Thumbs Still Strain

T. Alan Hurwitz, Ed.D., CEO of the National Technical Institute for the Deaf at Rochester Institute of Technology in New York, said

he depends on his BlackBerry for everyday communications. However, his thumb pain became so severe that he sought medical help. Now, he undergoes physical therapy.

While Hurwitz said he has reduced the amount of time he spends "thumbing" his messages, he isn't about to cut his BlackBerry out of his life altogether.

"My BlackBerry is a part of me, and I can hardly separate myself from it," Hurwitz said. "I use it everywhere, anytime, all over the world. It enables me to keep up with my office work and stay close to my family."

Hurwitz isn't alone in his BlackBerry dependence.

BlackBerry Thumb: An Epidemic?

According to a study conducted by Ipsos-Reid, an international market research firm, 98 percent of BlackBerry users said the handheld device allows them to convert downtime into productive time, with an average productivity return of more than \$21,000 a year.

It doesn't matter which device you're using - whether it's a BlackBerry, Treo, cell phone or other handheld device - any small and repetitive motion of a single digit of the hand will likely result in injury from overuse, Brown said.

But while the discomfort associated with BlackBerry thumb isn't as severe as the aches and pains of running a marathon untrained, the problem is causing woes for millions of business and government officials who have come to depend on the Web-ready device.

Addiction, perhaps?

Some doctors say that BlackBerry and other PDAs are the business version of a video game, and like Tetris and Nintendo before, people just can't stop playing them.

The Treatment? Two Thumbs Up

For most healthy adults, muscle soreness in the thumb can be alleviated, Brown said, by following the steps of "RICE" - rest, ice, compression and elevation.

Those in pain can also try using nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NAIDs) like aspirin or ibuprofen.

It is very rare, Brown said, that BlackBerry thumb escalates into a serious problem. For most, it's just a discomfort. But for the elderly or those in poor health, thumb overuse can result in tendon-tearing, she said.

There are preventive steps BlackBerry devotees can take to avoid the pain and irritation that results from overuse, Brown said, and all that's involved is the simple strengthening of the hand muscles.

People could squeeze a small ball, stress ball or hand grip exerciser, or play with clay, Brown suggested.

Sore BlackBerry users could also start using a pen or stylus to type instead of their thumbs - or possibly purchase voice-activated software. Full-size plug-in keyboards are also available for about \$100.

Might users simply cut back on their BlackBerry use? "Oh, heavens no," Brown said.

"If they really want it, they will do the activity," she added. "Eventually, with moderation, the muscles and the tendons get strong enough to absorb the damage."