

A pain in the neck for kids and adults

Neck headaches becoming common in an age of video games and computers

The next time you feel the onset of a headache, you might want to have a look down and take note of your posture and body position. If you're hunched over a computer or playing a video game, chances are you're suffering from an increasingly common complaint known as a cervicogenic headache.

"We're seeing more and more patients with cervicogenic headaches – more commonly known as neck headaches," says Blair Schachterle, physical therapist ¹and executive chair of the Canadian Academy of Manipulative Therapy (CAMT). "People are working longer hours hunched over a computer and end up going home in the evening with shooting pain in their back and neck that results in a headache. Many of us are at risk. In fact, if you spend any more than 70 per cent of your time at work with your neck bent forward at 20 degrees, which is the same as reading, writing or looking down at a computer, you're at increased risk of a neck headache."²

Schachterle goes on to say that it's not just adults who are suffering from neck headaches. "We're noticing an increase in the number of kids and young adults suffering as a result of spending hours engrossed in video games and computer usage, oblivious to their posture and the strain they're placing on their growing bodies. It's a trend that has increased in school-aged children since the 1990s. And, interestingly, we're seeing it more often in girls than in boys. Researchers in Finland have discovered that, by age 14, 24 per cent of girls and 12 per cent of boys have suffered from some form of neck and shoulder pain. By the time they're 18, those numbers jump to 45 per cent of girls and 19 per cent of boys.³ They're numbers that we're seeing mirrored here in Canada."

Neck headaches are certainly nothing new. However, what is alarming to Schachterle and his colleagues within CAMT is the frequency with which they are occurring in modern society, especially in this age of continuous computer usage and increased video game playing.

"One of the leading causes of neck headaches is simply bad posture," explains Schachterle. "Imagine a person sitting at their desk, in front of their computer. As the hours pass, their posture gets worse, their head drops down, their back and shoulders roll forward, placing a lot of tension on the neck muscles. Meanwhile, those muscles are trying to fight back and keep your head in proper alignment. As a result of this tension,

¹ Physical therapist = physiotherapist

² Ariens GA, Bongers PM, Hoogendoorn WE, et al. 2002. High physical and psychosocial load at work and sickness absence due to neck pain. *Scand J Work Environ Health*, 28; 222-231

³ Hakala P, Rimpela A, Salminen JJ, Virtanen SM, Rimpela M. 2002 Back, neck and shoulder pain in Finnish adolescents: national cross sectional surveys. *BMJ* 325 p 743

they end up experiencing increased stress and strain on the muscles and joints of the upper neck and this results in a neck headache.”

Neck headaches can sometimes last days or even months. The pain is described as a vise-like pressure across the head and, while not as severe as a migraine, can be just as debilitating in extreme cases.

Fortunately, relieving the pain can be done without medication or invasive techniques. A CAMT physiotherapist can assess and treat a patient’s neck headache through a multi-faceted approach, including stretching of tight muscles, strengthening of weak muscles and gentle mobilization or manipulation of the neck joints. The ideal solution is preventing neck headaches from ever happening. That’s where a CAMT physiotherapist can also help by advising patients on maintaining correct posture, providing suggestions on more ergonomic workspaces, and educating them on how to properly lift and use their muscles in a way that will help them avoid such problems in the future.

What sets CAMT physiotherapists apart from other physiotherapists is their advanced post-graduate diploma in Orthopaedic Manual Therapy. This specialized training allows them to use hands-on techniques to more specifically assess and treat individual joints and soft-tissues for injury and movement disorders. Manual therapy may include massage, stretching, mobilization or manipulation of joints and soft-tissue including muscle, tendon and ligament. In the case of a neck headache, a manual therapist will often provide hands-on stretching of the specific key muscles that are tight, as well as recommend a regimen of self-stretching exercises for the patient. It’s a safe, comfortable and proven hands-on approach to restore full pain-free mobility and get people moving, faster.

“A neck headache is the most common headache and the most easily preventable,” says Schachterle. “Simple things like being aware of our posture, avoiding strenuous movements and living a healthy lifestyle that includes exercise will all help to ensure that our daily lives don’t become a pain in the neck.”

About the Canadian Academy of Manipulative Therapists

The Canadian Academy of Manipulative Therapy is a group of skilled physiotherapists with extensive post-graduate education in manual therapy and clinical reasoning, who have passed an internationally recognized accreditation process. As a result, they have a comprehensive understanding of advanced manual therapy—a key component of the multi-modal approach. With over 370 members in ten provincial associations, Fellows of CAMT excel in such areas as sports injuries, spinal instabilities, lower limb/pelvic alignment disorders, whiplash injuries, and foot disorders. CAMT members have worked to improve the standards of manipulative and other manual therapy skills, encourage scientific research and promote new discoveries, while supporting their larger, national association the Canadian Physiotherapy Association.