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Prevention of Mouse-Related Pain

By Jennifer Hohne, AEP Corporate Ergonomist

With the advent of mouse-intensive software has come an increase in reports of cumulative trauma disorders. These injuries/disorders, referred to collectively as "Mouse-itis", usually occur because of the awkward arm, wrist, and shoulder positions adopted by the operator and the overuse of small muscle groups in the hand and wrist. The symptoms include: pain encircling the wrist, pain on the ulnar side of the hand (pinkie finger) that radiates along the forearm up to the elbow, pain in the trapezius muscles (top of shoulders) that can radiate up to the neck, pain between the shoulder blades, elbow pain (tennis elbow/epicondylitis), pain in the palm, and loss of finger control (writer's cramp). Besides pain, the symptoms may include numbness, a burning sensation, and swelling. While most mouse packages include some instructions on use, perhaps more detailed observations would prevent these injuries from occurring.

- Purchase long keyboard trays or trays with pull-out/adjustable mouse extensions allowing your mouse to be on the same operating plane as your keyboard.
- Make sure the operating plane of your mouse and keyboard is low enough to prevent shoulder and elbow over-extension. You are in a correct position when your upper arms are straight down to your sides, your elbows are bent at about 90 degrees or greater, and your wrists are neutral.
- Keep your mouse free of lint and other debris to allow easy, smooth operation preventing the need to grasp and lift the mouse.
- Choose a mouse that fits your hand size so your fingers can relax over the mouse and allow the mouse to support the entire weight of your hand.
- Don't hold the mouse with a "death grip". Relax!
- Don't keep your finger "cocked" in mid-air and ready to click. Allow it to lay gently over the mouse button.
- Let your hand relax (on your lap) between tasks.
- Don't rest on your wrist while moving the mouse with only your fingers. This exhausts the small muscles in the hand and wrist. Float the whole arm along with your mouse movement utilizing the large muscle groups in your arms, which are much more capable of absorbing the trauma of repeated use. Elbow support is a much better alternative than wrist support.
- Mouse with your non-dominant hand i.e. if you write with your right hand, mouse with your left. It takes some getting used to so be patient!
- If you are an intensive mouse user, learn alternative keyboard commands for your common mouse actions i.e. on your keyboard, CTRL C may be pressed instead of using your mouse to select EDIT, COPY.
- Take frequent, short breaks throughout the day.

Following these simple guidelines for mouse use and injury prevention will go a long way towards improving the quality of your life at work. If, after including these guidelines in your work practices, you are still experiencing pain or discomfort, seek help. A repetitive injury caught early is one likely to be easily corrected. Remember that work shouldn't hurt!

If you have any further questions, please contact the Haworth, Inc. Corporate Ergonomist, Jennifer Hohne.