

# Sidestepping Carpal Tunnel Syndrome

**C**arpal tunnel syndrome, or CTS, a nerve disorder of the wrist, now accounts for about half of all occupational injuries. The reasons include improper posture and wrist

positions, along with forceful motions while using computers.

In "the old days," when most office workers used typewriters, they took periodic breaks to change the paper or

the ribbon, things most modern workers don't need to do. Such breaks rested the wrists, preventing repetitive motion injury. Today's computers and programs often require the operator to perform tasks at a higher rate of speed and more frequently than on typewriters.

## What Is CTS?

Tendons in the wrist run through a circle of bones and ligaments in the wrist called the "carpal tunnel." Repetitive motions without adequate recovery time can cause the inflammation, swelling and scarring of these tendons. Swollen tendons press on the median nerve, which also runs through the carpal tunnel. The result is pain, weakness, tingling, numbness or a burning sensation in the wrist, palm and fingers. Pain may even extend to the forearm, elbow, shoulders, neck and upper back.

## Preventing CTS

The best way to prevent CTS—and to relieve it once it strikes—is to work with your forearms, from your elbows to your fingers, in a straight line. This places less pressure on the nerves and tendons in your wrists. To accomplish this, adjust the height of your chair and keyboard so that when your elbows are bent at a right angle, your forearms are parallel with the floor. Keep your feet flat on the floor or on a foot stool. With your low back supported against your chair, "stack" your ears, shoulders and hips in a straight line.

Get up about every hour and briefly stretch your back, neck, arms, hands and wrists, even if you don't feel much tension or strain at the time. Also, take all the breaks to which you're entitled.

Vary your activities, if possible, or rest your wrists completely, perhaps by reading a report or attending a meeting. Use a wrist pad to rest your wrists on, rather than resting them on the keyboard. This type of pad runs along the lower edge of the keyboard. Even a small, rolled up towel will do.

If you smoke, cut down or quit. Nicotine constricts small blood vessels and can make it more difficult for your wrist to heal.

Carpal tunnel syndrome often goes away if you catch it early and change your work habits. Otherwise, it may require months or even years of treatment and occasionally even calls for surgery. To be safe, see a doctor if symptoms last one or two weeks.



### Here are some therapies to prevent, counteract or treat carpal tunnel syndrome:

- ▶ Squeeze your hands into fists or around a foam ball and rotate them from the wrist in one direction 15 times. Then stretch out your fingers as far apart as possible and rotate your hands again 15 times in the same direction.
- ▶ Extend one hand as if shaking hands and gently pull back on your thumb with the other hand. Hold for five seconds. Repeat up to five times and change hands. Then extend one hand and gently pull your thumb down toward your palm for five seconds. Repeat up to five times and change hands.
- ▶ Take aspirin or ibuprofen. Both reduce pain and inflammation.
- ▶ In severe cases, put ice compresses on your wrists at home for about 20 minutes at a time, with 10-minute breaks, until the inflammation and swelling subside.