

Source: The Straits Times, Page A4
Date: 15 May 2023

‘Tech neck’ and other ailments from using devices more prevalent: Doctors

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The head weighs about 4kg, but when bent forward 3cm, like when a person is peering at a screen, its weight is doubled or tripled.

Musculoskeletal disorders such as neck pain are increasingly prevalent, with prolonged usage of technological devices, sedentary lifestyles and poor ergonomics at work to blame.

In a January 2023 article, the National University Health System (NUHS) said people who frequently use their mobile devices or laptops often have bad posture, which can lead to injuries to their neck and spine in the long term.

“With current lifestyle trends and our societal pre-occupation with our devices and gadgets, it is likely we will see more patients with chronic neck pain in the coming years,” said Dr Alex Teo of the National University Hospital (NUH).

Treatments for chronic neck pain in general range from non-operative options, such as physiotherapy and acupuncture, to more invasive interventions such as injections and surgery, added Dr Teo, who is an associate consultant at the University Spine Centre’s Department of Orthopaedic Surgery.

Pain specialist Bernard Lee said some patients he has seen had endured 10 years of chronic pain. They initially relied on over-the-

counter medication for some relief. “A common mistake or misconception is that painkillers can cure pain, when in fact they are merely a Band-Aid solution that suppress our body’s ability to feel or generate pain signals.

“Painkillers do not repair or eliminate the part of the body that is damaged, injured, or causing the pain,” said Dr Lee from Singapore Paincare Centre.

A study by researchers in Singapore, published in 2021 in the Spine medical journal, found that neck pain is increasingly common here. They said the condition can result in significant disability and loss of quality of life.

The researchers found that among 626 individuals surveyed here, about 23 per cent reported neck pain over the past six months.

In the NUHS article, Adjunct Associate Professor Gamaliel Tan said that the neck and lower spine tend to be in a flexed position when using digital devices and with office work. Over time, this can lead to poor posture and pain.

He added that the pain can be muscular in origin, and this can be corrected by exercises.

“But sometimes it can lead to pinched nerves if the intervertebral disc (jelly) slips out and compresses the nerve leading to the arms and legs. In these cases, medication or even surgery might be needed to unpinch the nerve,” said Prof Tan.

Dr Marcus Ling, a senior consult-



Pain specialist Bernard Lee said some patients he has seen had endured 10 years of chronic pain.

After undergoing treatments, Ms Ng Chiew Ping said about 90 per cent of her pain has been resolved. PHOTO: COURTESY OF MS NG CHIEW PING

ant in the orthopaedic surgery department at Singapore General Hospital (SGH), said neck aches are treated conservatively first through physiotherapy, painkillers, rest, and wearing of a neck brace.

However, for patients who show no sign of improvement, surgery may be needed.

Ms Ng Chiew Ping, 49, started experiencing dizzy spells at the start of the pandemic in 2020 while working as a childcare teacher.

She consulted a general practitioner and visited hospitals for a diagnosis, but the scans showed no abnormalities.

At work, Ms Ng, who has been a

childcare teacher for 30 years, has to sit on furniture suitable for children. This affected her posture and caused strain to her body, especially her neck.

The pain spread to her whole neck and shoulders, and sometimes extended all the way to her forehead, she said.

“I was unable to leave home for work on the days I felt particularly unwell. I was taking up to five days of medical leave every month,” added Ms Ng.

After a year of enduring the pain, she consulted Dr Lee, who diagnosed her with chronic neck pain and occipital neuralgia, a rare neurological condition that causes pain around the base and both sides of the head.

After undergoing minimally invasive treatments of platelet-rich plasma (PRP) with nerve blockers, and changing her lifestyle by including more exercise and a better diet, Ms Ng said about 90 per cent of her pain has been resolved.

Dr Lee said PRP is used in the recovery of soft tissue and muscle injuries such as torn tendons, arthritis pain and even joint injuries.

The process involves spinning the patient’s blood in a centrifuge to force the cells to separate to extract the platelet-rich plasma to inject into specific areas.

Dr Teo said PRP has been used to treat many painful and degenerative conditions throughout the body, to stimulate healing and regeneration.

“These include conditions such as osteoarthritis of the knee and lateral epicondylitis of the elbow (tennis elbow). Evidence for its effectiveness, however, is inconsistent,” he added. “We do not use PRP in spine surgery in our practice at NUH. There is no consensus in literature about the use of PRP as standard of care in spine surgery.”

Dr Ling said PRP is not commonly used in the treatment of neck ache in SGH.

Dr Lee said that although there are many treatment options available for musculoskeletal disorders, prevention is better than cure.

But he added that if chronic or persistent pain starts, it is important to seek treatment early.

SGH offered tips to counter “tech neck” in a podcast. They include:

- Take frequent breaks from technological devices. After every 45 minutes, move away from your workstation and do simple stretches. Stretching helps in preventing symptoms associated with computer usage.
- Use a desktop instead of a laptop. The monitor and keyboard of desktops are positioned in a more ergonomic position.
- Have proper seating. The armrest and the adjustable heights of chairs are things that the office has that our homes do not.

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