

# CHILDREN AND RSI

## IS RSI A PROBLEM FOR OUR KIDS?

It seems unlikely, but RSI is an increasing problem for even young children as computing becomes a bigger part of life from a very early age. Computer use can involve poor posture, long hours of sitting and repetitive activity and these factors can lead to muscular pain.

One study of 200 students found that computers were used, on average, for two hours a day or more and a third of this time is being spent playing computer games unrelated to the child's education. Twenty-seven per cent of these children reported some kind of physical complaint, and significantly increased levels of back pain were found amongst children who were computing for several hours.

Making sure your child's work environment is properly set up can massively reduce the risk of muscle pain. Computers are often not set up properly for kids' young bodies and this is a significant factor behind the increase in overuse injuries in children. Another major factor is a lack of evidence-based guidelines and education around safe computer use.

### WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Research by Dr Leon Straker from Curtin University's School of Physiotherapy and Exercise Science has investigated how to best set up workstations for children and reduce their risk of overuse injuries. He recommends that you

- Limit time spent at the computer
  - Take an active break every 30—60 minutes as well as
  - Take a 30 second break every 3—15 minutes.
- Incorporate variety
  - Switch between different tasks e.g. Reading, Data Entry, etc.
  - Use a mixture of the mouse and the keyboard, as well as more active sensor technologies like the Wii for gaming.
- Make sure the desk is correctly set up
  - Make sure that the keyboard is pushed back so that your child's wrists can rest comfortably on the desk in front of it. This can prevent the development of pain in the wrists.
  - Having the desk slightly below elbow height is important to avoid compromising spinal posture.
- Get the right equipment
  - The equipment for children often needs to be smaller than for adults. For example, the mouse needs to be smaller and with a lower clicking force to reduce stress on the wrist.
  - The monitor should be lower down so the top of the monitor is at eye-level or up to 45° below that.
  - If adults in the house are using the same desk as your child, it's very unlikely that these requirements will be met.
- Get a light laptop
  - If your child has to carry their laptop between home and school, having a lighter laptop and a well-fitting backpack can take a load off their shoulders.
- Teach your child good computer skills
  - Simply making sure your child is educated about proper computer technique can make a huge difference.
  - It's also important to teach your child to react to pain and make an adjustment as children do not do this as intuitively as an adult.

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- Use correct posture
  - Having a good chair with proper back support is one of the best ways to improve posture.
  - With children, the chair is often the wrong height. The distance between the ground and the seat, should be the same as the distance between the underside of the thigh at the knee and the floor. Adjustable seats can be very helpful.
  - Backrests reduce spinal loading and can help retain the lumbar curve. But be careful, a bad backrest is worse than none at all. This is also true for armrests.
- Talk to your child's school!
  - A large amount of computer use will be done at your child's school and the equipment in the classrooms rarely meets the standards outlined by Dr Straker. Making sure the seats supplied provide proper support is one of the most important things to talk to your school about.
  - Research has shown that children respond well to education about correct computer use. A recent study in Johannesburg found that educating a group of adolescent students about correct ergonomics resulted in a significant decrease in the prevalence of muscle pain among the students.



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