

Kids, Computer Use and Injury

It's a running joke that if you have a problem with your computer the best person to ask for help is a kid. Yet kids who spend a lot of time using computers may be headed for long-term health problems unless they change the way they use this technology, warns the American Physical Therapy Association (APTA).

"We are seeing an increasing number of children with physical injuries from computer use that are more typical of those found in adults, such as carpal tunnel syndrome, tendinitis, and tension headaches," says physical therapist and APTA member Patrice Winter, MS, MPT. "Computers have become a large part of children's lives, both at home and at school. Parents and teachers need to know, however, that there are health consequences to computer use."

These negative health consequences stem from two common mistakes. First, sitting too long at the computer without moving around or changing position can result in repetitive motion disorders and muscle strain. Second, incorrect ergonomics such as not sitting up straight, not keeping eyes level with the screen, not keeping elbows and knees at right angles, and not using the correct-size mouse can trigger various physical ailments.

To help kids key in to healthy computing, the APTA has developed "Top 10 Ways To Monitor Kids' Computer Health," a practical guidelines for parents, teachers, and child caregivers to make computer use fun and safe.

"Top 10" Ways To Monitor Kids' Computer Health"

1. **Keep feet on the ground.** Make sure that the child's feet are touching the ground or a stool when seated. Knees should be at a 90-degree angle. This distributes weight better and takes pressure off the upper body. Consider investing in a height-adjustable chair, or use a stool.
2. **Sit up straight.** Make sure that the child sits tall with weight on the buttocks and feet. The pelvis should be straight up and down.
3. **Eyes level with screen.** A good rule of thumb is to make sure the top of the child's head is parallel with the top of the screen $\frac{3}{4}$ "top-to-top." Anything less could lead to neck strain.
4. **Forearms parallel.** Make sure that forearms are parallel to the floor and the elbows are at a 90-degree angle.
5. **Shoulder blades settled.** Shoulder blades should be settled on the back of the ribs, not in an arched or hunched position.
6. **Correct mouse.** For smaller children, consider investing in a kid-sized mouse. Children using an adult-sized mouse are at greater risk for carpal tunnel syndrome. The larger mouse forces the hand into an awkward position and the muscles become over-stretched and fatigued.
7. **Rest the eyes.** Children should look away from the computer as often as possible and focus on distant objects. Staring uninterrupted at a computer screen for long periods of time can cause eye-strain and headaches.
8. **Take a break.** Encourage a mandatory break from the computer *at least every 20 minutes*.
9. **Stretch and move.** Do stretches such as head turns, shoulder rolls and marching in place while seated. If practical, get up and exercise to keep muscles and joints warm and flexible.
10. **Watch for problems.** Look for warning signs such as headaches, fatigue, muscle pain or cramping and intervene *early*. Post these rules near the computer and make them part of a daily, healthy routine!