

Self-care for injury prevention

By Tamara Mitchell



There are so many approaches to self-care, but what we are addressing in this article is specifically repetitive strain injury prevention. This article gives recommendations that are great for everyone, whether or not you are experiencing discomfort (and we hope you're not)! Self-care encompasses everything from stress reduction and nutrition to feel-good stretches and massage. It really boils down to your everyday habits and how you routinely care for yourself.

What do we mean by habits?

Habits are things you routinely do that nobody can change except you. The workstation can be set up correctly, you can use appropriate equipment, and you can get the best health care on the planet, but ultimately, your health and healing is your own responsibility.

These are things you do throughout the day that have become a pattern. Habits includes your posture, what you choose to eat, how much exercise you get, what type of exercise you do, what hobbies, sports, and activities you do in your spare time, and whether you take breaks throughout the work day. In fact, habits can also be your outlook on life, your relationship patterns, the anger and stress you hold in your body, and whether you are frustrated with certain things in your life or interactions with others and what you decide to do about those things..

Habits can be good or bad. Paying attention to your body and the signals it is sending is a very good habit. Giving yourself a little self-massage when you feel some muscles tightening up (or simply on a regular basis without tight muscles) and changing your posture every now and then are great habits. The point is, you are in control. If you pay attention, maybe do a little research or ask for some help figuring out what to do, and learn to care for your body just like you would any valued thing in your life (your car, an heirloom, or your cat), it will probably last a long time without major problems. Bad habits may include poor posture, overloading your days without allowing time to relax, not getting enough sleep, and/or blaming others for your problems.

Tips for Self Care

- **Do it always.** One of the important things to know about caring for yourself is that you can't just take a few hours, a day, or a weekend to nurture yourself. It may be a very nice, pampering experience, but in the long term, that little break doesn't really make up for all the abuse and stress you



force your body to deal with every day, year in and year out.² What matters is that you are aware of your body always and you care for it. You don't contort it into awkward postures or require it to hold one position for hours at a time, you give it good food, you let it rest, you keep it warm and hydrated, and you exercise it.

- **Learn more.** By educating yourself about the prevention and treatment of CTD, you can avoid this painful illness or begin your path to recovery. The more you know, the better you will be able to help yourself. The Working-Well.org website is comprehensive and up-to-date. Please take time to:
 - read the website. <http://working-well.org>
 - pick up one of the books we suggest on the Books web page. <http://working-well.org/Website/pbooks.html>
 - consider the Products section on our website when buying new products. <http://working-well.org/Website/products.html>
 - read our articles on injury prevention. <http://working-well.org/articles/archive.html>
 - learn from one of the many websites we list in our Online Resources section. http://working-well.org/Website/online_resources.html

- **Take Breaks.** Two different types of breaks are extremely important in the prevention of and recovery from CTD.
 - *Microbreaks* are 20 second to 1-minute breaks taken every 10 to 15 minutes to counteract the strain associated with repetitive or forceful desk, computer and lab work. During microbreaks:
 - Drop your hands by your side to stretch your arms, hands, shoulders, upper/mid back and neck
 - Look away from the monitor or reading material. Focus on something distant and blink your eyes to rest them and keep them from getting dry
 - Take a few deep breaths while standing up and moving around.

 - A *full break* every 45 – 60 minutes for 5 minutes or more is necessary to increase circulation and decrease muscle tension, the cause of CTD.² There are some great break reminder applications for your computer, to keep track of the time you have been sitting. Check our Break Reminder web page for some of our favorite break reminder programs: <http://working-well.org/Website/pbreaktmr.html>

- **Stretch.** Stretching increases circulation and lengthens muscles, reducing the risk of injury. The only way to fight CTD is to keep your muscles long and healthy. During microbreaks, do upper body stretches and during your longer breaks include some lower body stretches to get the circulation moving to eliminate the harmful consequences of sitting. Some stretch break software has animated stretches you can follow. Refer to the Stretches section of our website for some good stretches and links to YouTube videos: <http://working-well.org/Website/stretch.html>

- **Massage, Acupressure, and Exercises.** Massage your hands and forearms and neck and upper back several times a day. Massage improves circulation, eases muscle tension, reduces stress and



breaks up adhesions that cause CTD. Please refer to our webpage that has links to self-massage handouts, websites with self-massage and acupressure information, and links to websites with trigger point release information: <http://working-well.org/Website/massage.html> . Check our products web page that suggests products you can use for self-massage: <http://working-well.org/Website/pselfcare.html> . If you feel tension in parts of your body you cannot massage yourself, schedule a therapeutic massage with a massage therapist. Ask a friend to find a good one or check our list several excellent ones in the San Francisco Bay Area: http://working-well.org/Website/ctd_resources.html#massage

- **Be conditioned.** Exercise is critical for the prevention of and recovery from. Even short aerobic exercise sessions every other day are enough to affect blood flow and help the body cope with stress. Strengthening your large muscle groups also prepares your body for the wear and tear of daily activities. Please read our article on planning an exercise program if you need help getting back in the excellent habit of exercising: <http://working-well.org/articles/pdf/Fit.pdf> .



- **Reduce Stress.** Periodically evaluate your environment for ways to reduce stress. Stress inhibits correct breathing and restricts circulation, in addition to triggering a chain of unhealthy hormonal imbalances. You can read all about the stress response in our article on the topic: <http://working-well.org/articles/pdf/Stress.pdf>

- **Reduce clutter** on your desk, in your office, and in your life so you can find things and there is order. Make sure computer programs are set up correctly and your computer files are organized in an efficient and logical manner. Did you know we have a great article on Feng Shui for your office and your life that includes clutter clearing? Having an organized place to work gives real peace of mind: <http://working-well.org/articles/pdf/Feng%20Shui.pdf>



- **Modify your reaction.** When you cannot avoid stress, step back and evaluate your reactions. You can't always eliminate stress in life, but you can modify your reactions so they don't harm you. We don't have an article on this, but we have addressed dealing with frustration, which gives some guidance on changing one's response to situations: <http://working-well.org/articles/archive.html#frustration>
- **Seek help** for you and other household members to cope with stress. Check with your employer to see if they have a program to help household members in need of counseling or other types of help. Many counties have clinics available. In an immediate emergency, always call 911.

Practice pain-free posture. Headaches, neck and lower back pain, as well as knee and feet problems, may be solved by simple improvements in posture. Doctors around the country say they are seeing an increasing number of posture-related health problems. Poor posture triggers a cascade of tiny

structural changes and shifts throughout the body that can have painful consequences. Pressure is added to muscles and joints when the head and shoulders are held forward and the spine and pelvis are shifted out of alignment. Although no body is perfectly straight or symmetrical, when the body is held in its neutral position, pain can be avoided. Exercises can strengthen your body so that your posture is improved. Please refer to our Feature Article on Posture, Balancing & Alignment: http://working-well.org/articles/pdf/Posture_Balance.pdf

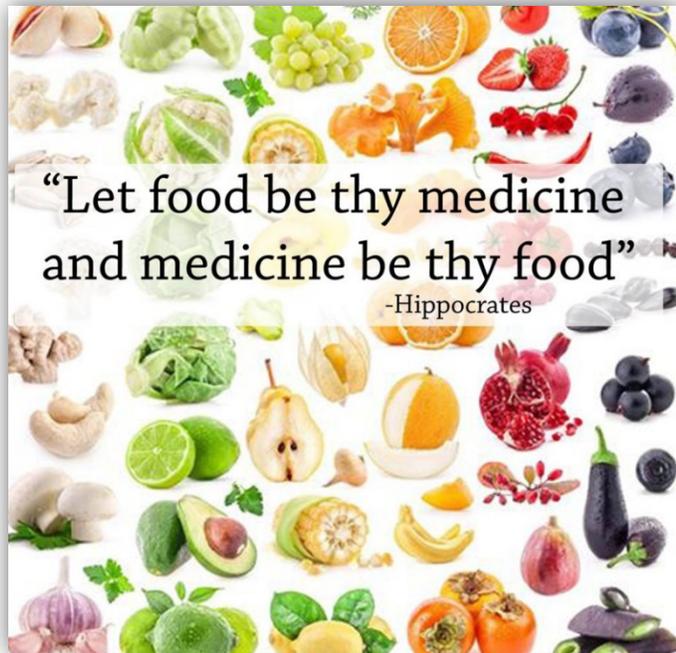
Check your posture throughout the day. Your feet should sit flat on the floor and your knees should never be higher than your hips; they should be even with your hips or slightly lower. Align your ears with your hips, keeping your shoulders back and relaxed. Do not crane your neck and shoulders forward to look at the computer screen. Your upper and lower arms should be at right angles. Keep your wrists straight, with your fingers relaxed in the natural fall of the hand. If you use a wrist rest, your wrists should not be bent or touch the pad while you type. Rest your wrists only when you are not typing or using the mouse...or better yet, drop your hands and let them hang by your sides.

More and more people are becoming aware of the positive benefits of working with a sit/stand workstation. If your job requires you to work on the computer most of the day, it is not natural for the body to sit that many hours. Even if you get up and take breaks to walk around and stretch, hours of sedentary posture is hard on the body. Having the option to stand to work for part of the day is extremely healthy.

Working in a lab often requires some awkward postures. If you cannot work in a neutral posture while in the lab environment, it is extremely important that you counteract the forceful positions with stretches. Please read our articles on laboratory ergonomics to see if you can do things better in your work area: <http://working-well.org/articles/archive.html#lab> .

- **Hydrate.** Drink plenty of water throughout the day. Keeping your body fluid level high is important for proper muscle and nerve functioning. There is such a thing as too much of a good thing, though! For more information on hydration please read our in-depth article on the subject: <http://working-well.org/articles/pdf/Hydration.pdf>
- **Use keyboard shortcuts.** Overuse of the mouse or trackball will cause pain from your hands to neck. Learn a couple of keyboard commands (i.e., shortcuts) every week to minimize the strain associated with “mousing”. Many shortcuts are available for Windows and Mac, in addition to Netscape, the Microsoft Office programs, Costpoint, iPad, and most other applications. We have information about some of these on our website: http://working-well.org/Website/keyboard_shortcuts.html Decide what operations you do the most and start learning those shortcuts first. If you use a different application, search for the shortcuts information usually provided via the Help menu. They are often found by typing “Keyboard Shortcuts”. One way to find out what shortcuts will help you is to put the mouse away completely. Try to navigate and perform your usual functions without the mouse at all for a few minutes. You will quickly find out what shortcuts you need to learn!
- **Be Aware.** Everything you do outside of work can be a source of problems. We have a web page with some quick suggestions for helping you with things you may be doing outside of work: http://working-well.org/Website/sports_guideln.html . If you use shop tools, you may find it helpful to read the web pages written for the trades: http://working-well.org/Website/other_guideln.html
 - our article on Tools: <http://working-well.org/articles/archive.html#tools>
 - our article on Crafts: <http://working-well.org/articles/pdf/Crafts.pdf>And if you participate in gardening or sports, you will find a lot of information to help you avoid overuse injuries in most of our Feature Articles: <http://working-well.org/articles/archive.html>

- **Eat well.** You are what you eat. If you have a poor diet, you are not going to feel your best. Your muscles suffer from lack of proper nutrition and are more prone to injury. Shop the outer aisles of your grocery store and avoid the inner aisles where the processed foods are displayed. You'll find fresh fruits and veggies, fresh dairy, fresh meats, fish, and eggs, and fresh bread. Guess what? We have a great article on nutrition, nutraceuticals, and healing: <http://working-well.org/articles/pdf/NutritionNew.pdf> .



- **Have a healthy lifestyle.** Your health condition affects your risk for CTD. Unfortunately, certain unavoidable conditions, such as growing older or menopause, increase the odds of injury. Certain diseases, such as diabetes and thyroid conditions, compromise circulation and increase the chances of developing CTD.
 - The "legal" addictions of alcohol and tobacco are damaging to tissues, circulation, and oxygenation of the blood. Alcohol is a depressant and depression is related to CTD. Addictions of all types are debilitating and limiting. Many drugs, even though prescription, affect circulation.
 - Make sure you get enough sleep! Fatigue is well-known to be a prelude to injuries...and increases stress.



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This article and all of our articles are intended for your information and education. We are not experts in the diagnosis and treatment of specific medical or mental problems. When dealing with a severe problem, please consult with a healthcare or mental health professional and research the alternatives available for your particular diagnosis prior to embarking on a treatment plan. You are ultimately responsible for your own health and treatment!

REFERENCES:

1. "Why Breaks are Important" by Deborah Quilter, ©2016, Deborah Quilter, <http://www.rsihelp.com/why-breaks-are-so-important.html>
2. "45 Simple Self-Care Practices for a Healthy Mind, Body, and Soul", by Bard, E. ©2018 Tiny Buddha, LLC. <https://tinybuddha.com/blog/45-simple-self-care-practices-for-a-healthy-mind-body-and-soul/>