

Take Good Care of Yourself

The 12 Tips of Self Care

By Tamara Mitchell
Edited by Sally Longyear



The very best approach to self care is prevention. This article gives recommendations that are great for everyone, whether or not you are experiencing discomfort (and we hope you're not)!

The SRI Ergonomics Program has completed an analysis of data from 10 years of evaluations. We have looked for trends to determine the most common workstation flaws and the most common symptoms, along with many other things. **75%** of the evaluations noted that **HABITS** were a problem! Habits are things that no one else except **you** can change. You can arrange your workstation correctly and use appropriate equipment, and you can get the best health care on the planet, but ultimately, your health and healing is your own responsibility. We hope that you will "Choose Health", take some time to learn about Cumulative Trauma Disorder (CTD), also known as Repetitive Strain Injury, and take the initiative to change the habits that are causing you discomfort. Since there is no cure for CTD, if you want to stop hurting, you must do things differently or you will never recover. Many CTD sufferers lose the ability to work and to do many of the things they love.

The 12 Tips of Self Care:

1. **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. This website is comprehensive and up-to-date. Please take time read the web pages, pick up one of the books we suggest in the Books web page in the Products section on our website and/or learn from one of the many websites we list in our Online Resources section.
2. **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. Effective microbreaks include: 1) Dropping your hands by your side to stretch your arms, hands, shoulders, upper/mid back and neck, 2) Looking away from the monitor or reading material and focusing on something distant and blinking your eyes to rest them and keep them from getting dry, and 3) Taking a few deep breaths while standing up and moving around. A full break every 45 – 60 minutes for 5 minutes is necessary to increase circulation and decrease muscle tension, the cause of CTD.¹ There is some great break reminder software available to put on your computer to keep track of the time you have been sitting. Check our Break Reminder web page in the Products section that describes some of our favorite break reminder programs.
3. **BE CONDITIONED.** Exercise is **critical** for the prevention of and recovery from CTD. 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 series of articles on planning an exercise program if you need help getting started.
4. **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 this website for some good stretches and links to other websites with stretches and Office Yoga. In addition to stretching at work, it is crucial that you stretch throughout your recreational activities so you will not experience CTD.

5. **MASSAGE.** 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 Massage web page that suggests products you can use for self-massage and gives links to websites that will help you with self-massage techniques. If you feel tension in parts of your body you cannot massage yourself, schedule a therapeutic massage with a massage therapist. You may find one you like from our Therapeutic Resources web page in the Treatment section of our website if you live in the San Francisco Bay Area.
6. **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. Try to keep your desk uncluttered so you can find things. Make sure computer programs are set up correctly and your computer files are organized in an efficient and logical manner. 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. Seek help for you and your family to cope with stress.
7. **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.

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 wristrest, 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.

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.

8. **HYDRATE.** Drink plenty of water throughout the day. Keeping your body fluid level high is important for proper muscle and nerve functioning. Keep a water bottle with you all day and take a few sips during your microbreaks.
9. **USE 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 for Windows and Mac, in addition to Netscape and the Microsoft Office programs, are available on this website. Decide what operations you do the most and start using 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". A good 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!
10. **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. If you use shop tools, you may find it helpful to read the web pages written for the trades. And if you participate in gardening or sports, you will find a lot of information to help you avoid overuse injuries in our Feature Articles in the FAQ section of this website.

11. **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. In addition, a daily multivitamin and mineral supplement improves the functioning and facilitates healing of soft tissue.
12. **BE HEALTHY.** 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 through prescription, affect circulation. Even caffeine constricts blood vessels and is addictive.

If you have symptoms of CTD, consider switching to non-caffeinated beverages. Also, control your diabetes and other health conditions. Be honest about your addictions and get help if needed.

Finally, make sure you get enough sleep! Fatigue is well-known to be a prelude to injuries...and increases stress.

REFERENCES:

1. "Why Breaks are Important" by Deborah Quilter, ©1996-2003, Deborah Quilter, http://www.rsihelp.com/breaks_important.shtml
2. **Repetitive Strain Injury: A Computer User's Guide**, by Emil Pascarelli and Deborah Quilter. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1994; ISBN: 0471595330.
3. **It's Not Carpal Tunnel Syndrome!** By Suparna Damany, Jack Bellis, and Martin Cherniack. Simax, April 26, 2000; ISBN: 0965510999