

OMG, are you texting your way to neck pain?

By Dr. Scott A. Null

When I first started in practice over 35 years ago, I would see patients in their 70's and 80's with degenerative changes in their neck with forward head posture and neck pain. Lately I have been seeing similar forward head posture and neck pain in people in their 20's and 30's. What is causing this shift and what will happen to these patients when they get to be 70 or 80?

Cell phone use is increasing tremendously in the US, especially among young adults. It is even common to see very young children playing on smartphones. According to Patco Research, there are 2.19 Trillion text messages sent annually by US customers. 79% of the population, ages 18-44, have their cell phones with them 22 hours per day. People spend an average of 4 hours every day with their head down looking at their smartphone. That is over 1400 hours a year. I know I don't use my phone near that much, so someone is using a lot of my hours. The success of social media has led to an epidemic of bad smartphone posture. I know cell phone use is not the only reason for bad neck posture. People have looked down to read books for years, but this is just one more activity that causes us to look down far more than we did in the past. The biggest problem with this is that it could cause permanent damage to peoples necks, especially in young children whose spines have not fully developed.

All of this has led to a new "disease" called text neck. The symptoms of text neck include: chronic headaches, upper back pain, shoulder pain, neck pain and decreased curvature and motion of the spine.

A research article by Dr. Kenneth Hansraj, chief of spine surgery at New York Spine Surgery and Rehabilitation Medicine and published in the journal Surgical Technology International found that the more forward your head is flexed, the more pressure you put on your cervical spine. The average adult head weighs 10-12 pounds when it is in the upright position. The study showed that tilting your head just 15 degrees puts 27 pounds of pressure on your spine. At 30 degrees equals 40 pounds, 45 degrees adds the pressure of 49 pounds and at 60 degrees it would be 60 pounds. If you can't imagine what 60 pounds would feel like, just think about carrying a 7 or 8 year old child around on your neck for 4 hours a day.

Standing upright with good posture doesn't just make you look better, it optimizes your health. Other studies have found that good posture can reduce levels of the stress hormone cortisol. Also people with poor posture often have poorer physical and emotional health. Bad posture has been linked to several different medical problems including neurological problems, depression, constipation and heart disease.

I know this is not going to stop everyone from using a cell phone, but there are things you can do to minimize your chance of developing long term health problems and years of neck pain. Get checked regularly by your doctor of chiropractic to make sure your spine is in optimum balance. Try to keep your head in a neutral position when you use your phone and avoid spending hours hunched over. Get plenty of exercise and especially work your trap and rhomboid muscles that pull your head back and shoulders back. For more information contact your doctor of chiropractic or call me at 331-1520.