

## Young gamers at risk from RSI

The last thing on your mind when you're about to break through to a new level of Tomb Raider is improving your posture or stopping for a break. Yet children who spend hours surfing the net or sitting hunched over games consoles run a high risk of developing repetitive strain injuries (RSI).

The painful condition is well known among adults, and now the popularity of games terminals, computers (especially laptops) and text messaging is putting young people at risk. Mark Bender, the British Davis Cup tennis team physiotherapist, believes that the addictive nature of computer games makes them doubly hazardous: "Children spend hours in an unnatural position, while carrying out habitual repetitive micro-movements with their hands — punching the keys or battling with tiny consoles."

The condition, also known as work-related upper limb disorder, causes a range of symptoms. Common complaints include tingling, pins and needles, numbness, weakness, loss of movement, muscle spasm, shooting pains and pain between the shoulder blades.

Regular breaks, time limits, stretching and exercise all help, but motivating children to change their behaviour is tough. "Few children want to leave the middle of a gripping computer game to run up and down the stairs or stretch," says Bender.

Children's spines are also more vulnerable to RSI as a result of doing less sport and sitting at desks that are too small for them. The average size of a pupil has grown significantly over the past 30 years but few schools have invested in bigger chairs and desks. Less locker space and more homework also oblige children to lug around heavy books, while some schools ban rucksacks — the safest way to carry heavy books. "Children are still developing their bone structure and muscle tension, so bad posture could cause debilitating pain for life," says Bender.

Bunny Martin, director of the Body Action Campaign, has teamed up with Arsenal Football Club to raise awareness of RSI. "Children listen to advice from their heroes and stretching should be as automatic for computer users as it is for footballers," says Martin. "Children are aware of injuries that can happen on the pitch, but have never been taught to protect themselves from computer-related strains."

The players recently kicked off an awareness campaign at the Highbury ground, showing schoolchildren useful exercises and explaining the importance of stretching. "The main message for young people is to start protecting yourself now," says Martin. "RSI damage is rarely permanent with children, and simple preventative measures and rehabilitation will solve the problem."

Encourage children to try the following:

- Stop every 20 minutes to exercise and stretch. Run up and down the stairs to get the heart pumping and oxygen flowing into critical nerves. Lock hands with palms facing out and stretch them over the head, behind the back and out in front. Shrug the shoulders, then slowly drop the head sideways to each shoulder.
- Sit with the back straight and computer screen in line with eyes. Adjust the chair height so forearms and thighs are horizontal and the upper arms hanging straight. Hands must be level with wrists, and head and hips should be pointing in the same direction. Use both hands to type and touch the keys lightly, don't pound.
- Set limits. An active child can safely spend up to three hours a day sitting at a PC or console, as long as they stop for regular breaks. Non-active children should be restricted to 45 minutes a day.
- Improve PlayStation posture. Most gamers sit cross-legged on the floor, hunched in a ball over tiny consoles, or lie flat on their stomachs looking up at the television; both bad positions for the spine. A chair is a safer option.
- Listen to the body complaining and stop if it hurts.

**Heather Beresford**

*Body Action Campaign: 020 8682 2154*