

# Look out for these WFH pains

Damage to the nerves and tendons due to poor at-home work posture may lead to more severe problems, explains orthopaedic specialist, Dr Desmond Ong

**Q** I am a 35-year-old woman who has been working from home (WFH) since last year. On some days, I end up working for up to 12 hours. Recently, I have been experiencing some pain in my elbows and wrists. What do you think is causing the pain?

There are a few possibilities:

- Peripheral neuropathy, which leads to conditions such as cubital tunnel syndrome or carpal tunnel syndrome. This is due to pressure and tension on the nerves and is caused by poor posture and joint position.
- Repetitive movements may cause tendonitis, inflammation or irritation to the tendons. This comes from maintaining a position for a prolonged period of time, affecting tendons, which have poorer blood flow and their ability to heal.
- Poor posture. A forward head posture places considerable strain on the neck, and over time, spinal degeneration may impinge on the nerves along the forearm or hand. This can cause numbness, pins and needles, pain or weakness in the elbow or wrist.

Staying in one position in front of the computer for long stretches of time places great strain on the body, especially on the stabiliser muscles such as those around the neck or shoulder as well as on our nerves.

**Q** What is the potential impact on my body if I continue working for prolonged periods?

If left undiagnosed and untreated, the pain can progress to structural damage. This usually affects the nerves and tendons, which have poorer potential to heal.

Nerve injury can be divided into three grades:

- Mild neuropathy. This presents as intermittent numbness or pins and needles. It is usually relieved by a change of posture or position.
- Moderate neuropathy. As the condition progresses, transient discomfort becomes chronic, such as a



Prolonged strain on the body because of bad posture may affect the nerves and tendons. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

permanently altered sensation or loss of sensation – a sign of transiting from temporary reversible damage to irreversible damage.

- Severe neuropathy. There is evident weakness and atrophy of the muscles. At this point, recovery becomes difficult and there will be significant permanent disability.

Tendon injuries range from mild (tendonitis) to severe (tendon tear). Prolonged strain causes injury to the tendon and presents as tendonitis. It feels like a dull ache at the affected area, and may become more painful when you move it. There may also be tenderness and swelling.

**Q** How can I reduce the risks of elbow and wrist pain?

- Ensure your home office is set up ergonomically, with a desk at the proper height and a comfortable chair that supports your spine.
- Avoid scheduling back-to-back meetings – the strain on our body is the greatest when we are sitting still for prolonged periods.
- Have a proper work-rest routine. You could try the Pomodoro Technique, which involves working for 25 minutes before taking a five-minute break.
- Ensure adequate hydration. Dehydration reduces the lubrication in the joints. Moreover, taking toilet breaks also helps balance our screen time.

If things do not improve, consult a doctor to get a definitive diagnosis and receive more targeted treatment.



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