

## PASSAGE - II

An airconditioned computerized office seems an unlikely place for a work-related injury. Yet, more and more white-collar workers in hi-tech offices are complaining of disorders involving hands, wrists, arms, shoulders, neck and back. The common factor in most cases is swelling and growing pain at one of these sites.

The many variations of this problem are now covered by a common name-Repetitive Stress Injury (RSI), also known as Cumulative Trauma Disorder. No statistics are available in India, but the US Bureau of Labour Statistics recently reported that in their heavily mechanical work environment, 48 per cent of all occupational injuries were RSI. With computer keyboard becoming almost standard equipment, Repetitive stress injuries crop up most frequently in modern offices. But anyone who spends long hours in repetitive motion every day is at risk of injuring the muscles and joints involved. This includes postal staff involved in non-stop sorting and stamping, assembly line workers and packers - Swollen finger joints is a common complaint among children who earn their living by rolling thousands of bidis a day. Musicians and athletes in heavy practice can also be struck by RSI. The condition could begin with the occasional ache or numbness, later leading to a permanently painful condition.

Why are repetitive Stress Injuries in the limelight now, although people have been working at repetitive jobs since time immemorial? Why didn't the typists who slaved over typewriter complain of RSI, while modern operators working on "soft-touch" keyboards take treatment for swollen wrists? To some extent, such injuries probably went unreported. (It was earlier known as a tennis elbow or housemaid's knee would now be called Repetitive stress Injury!).

But there are also other reasons, say RSI specialists. Jobs are becoming more special. A few decades ago, the office clerk got relief from the key-board when he got up to file, attend the phone or walked to other departments. Now that everything from record-search to full proof-reading to filing is done on the computer, the office worker is pounding the keyboard almost non-stop all day. There's less old-fashioned paper insertion or carriage-throwing and that to the speed and productivity. Less office space means tight seating, with limited leg room and practically no place to stretch.

RSI experts also blame the pressures of modern day working life. The need to appear "on top of work", performance anxiety and the fear of being laid off all make the average office worker a bundle of stress that affects muscle tension.

Individual habits also increase the risk of RSI. Working on a keyboard while cradling a receiver between neck and shoulder, stretching the neck to read the screen or hitting the key with excess force are some traits which put extra strain on hand and neck joints.

The risk of RSI goes up significantly when your workstation makes you operate in an unnatural posture: a monitor that makes you look upwards all the time, a keyboard that bends your wrists awkwardly, a chair that gives no back support or a writing surface that is too high. "The human body can take heavy duty but it protests with misuse" says one orthopaedic specialist.

Awareness of the risk and prevention is the best defence against stress injuries. Here are some simple suggestions from RSI specialists:

"Reschedule work order and alternate highly repetitive tasks with other work. Don't insist on doing anything in one marathon go!" Move phone, files or printer to a location you have to walk to. Seems tiresome, but kinder in the long run."

Consciously change position when you can. Get your hands off the answering phone."

Move around at least once every hour to restore blood flow and uncramp muscles "go easy on the keys and the levers." Extra force leads to extra strain.

"Lean back occasionally. If your chair does not support the small of the back, use a cushion."

Ack. Kalpana Denskar, TOI