

Repetitive Stress Injury:

Too Much of the Same Old Thing

They say that practice makes perfect, but sometimes doing the same thing over and over can cause problems.

One of these problems is repetitive stress injury. This kind of injury sometimes is associated with sports, and it has names like “tennis elbow” or “runner’s knee.” A repetitive stress injury that is becoming more common is caused by work and play. It’s called carpal tunnel syndrome (CTS).

Carpal tunnels are narrow passageways inside the wrists. The carpal tunnels are crowded with nerves, blood vessels, and tendons that connect the muscles of your forearms with your hands and fingers. When you flex your forearm muscles to move your fingers, the tendons slide back

and forth through the carpal tunnels.

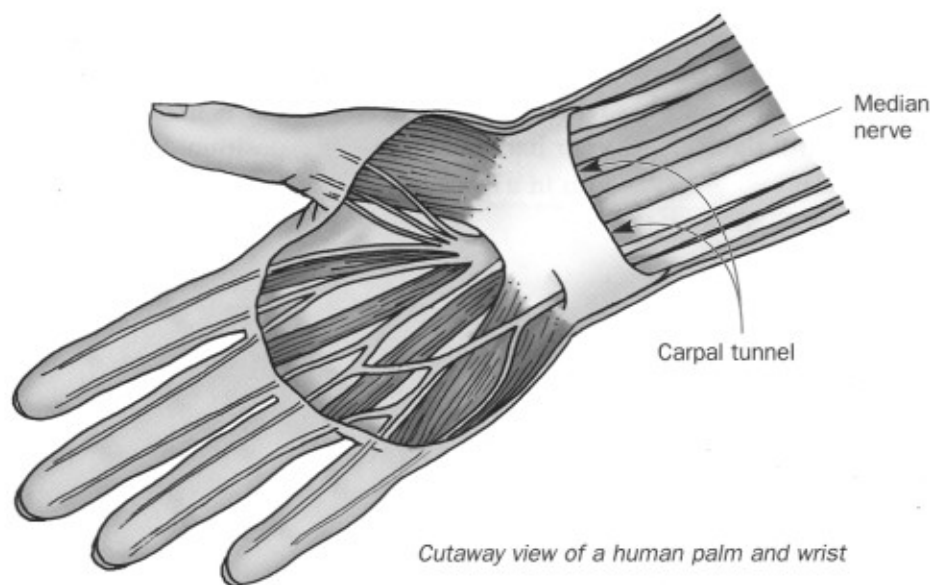
Many people work at jobs—such as typing, cutting meat, or checking out groceries—that involve making the same movements with their hands hour after hour. This can cause pain and difficulty when they move their wrists and hands. The constant movement can cause the tendons in their wrists to swell.

This creates pressure on the nerves that run through the carpal tunnels. The result is a tingling or pain in the hand or arm. Sometimes the pain can extend to the neck and shoulders.

For some people, the discomfort becomes so bad that they can’t work. Repetitive stress injuries, especially CTS, seem to be becoming more

common. In 1985, 50,000 workers missed time from their jobs because of repetitive stress injuries; by 1995, the number had jumped to 300,000.

CTS doesn’t cause problems only for adults. Young people can suffer from it, too. If you have a computer, you know it’s a great way to do homework and a great place to play.



Cutaway view of a human palm and wrist

Sometimes students spend so much time typing reports, vaporizing aliens, and writing e-mail that they can develop CTS. They might have to wear a wrist brace or stay away from the keyboard, mouse, or joystick until their wrist heals.

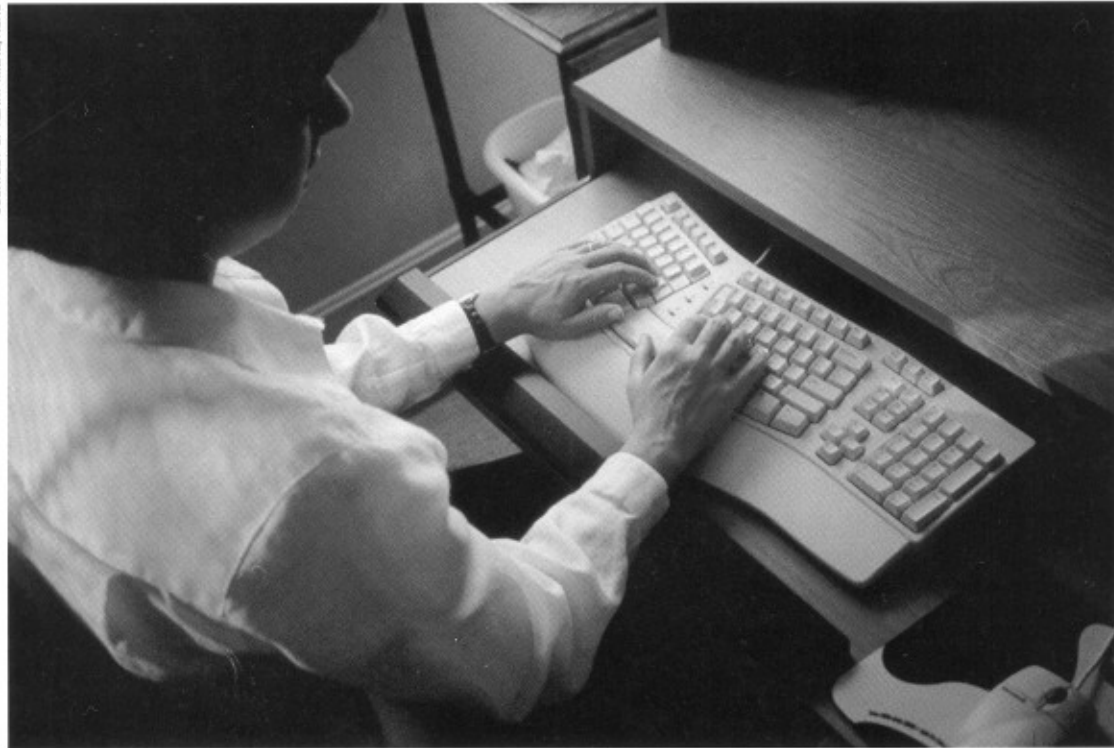
What can you do to prevent CTS? Take a break. Stand up and stretch your hands, arms, and neck. When you move your mouse, use your whole arm, not just your wrist and hand. When you type, keep your hand and forearm in a straight line

and make sure your wrists aren't resting on anything. Some keyboards help you to keep your hands in the right position—they are bent in the middle so you don't have to hold your wrists in an unnatural position. It's important to have the right

kind of chair, too. Get one that supports your back.

If you're careful, you can spend plenty of time at the computer and not have to worry about anything more serious than getting the right answers for your homework! □

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Some computer keyboards are especially designed to prevent CTS. Proper posture is important, too.