

## RSI – IS NOT JUST FOR CHRISTMAS

It's Christmas – time to put up your decorations, write your Christmas cards, shop, cook, eat, drink and be merry. But have you ever felt any twinges in your hands as you write yet another Christmas card? Pains in your shoulder as you stretch to put the fairy on top of the tree? Or aching in your back as you lift yet more shopping out of the car?

Many people can make light of festive aches and pains as they will be short-term and soon forgotten about. But spare a thought this Christmas for RSI - repetitive strain injury - sufferers for whom chronic pain is part of their daily lives all year round.

RSI is one of the most persistent and least understood chronic pain conditions and annually prevents an estimated 500,000 people in the UK from performing everyday tasks, ranging from brushing their hair to working at their computer, without pain and discomfort. To my mind RSI is also one of the more preventable chronic pain conditions.

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RSI symptoms can include aching, numbness, pins & needles, shooting pains, tightness and tingling. However, the nature of the condition is such that symptoms can change from day to day, or even hour to hour, both in their type and their severity.

This combination means that RSI is notoriously difficult to diagnose accurately using the Western medical approach. Diagnosis within the NHS tends to focus only on the area of the body where symptoms are felt, so RSI treatment typically follows the path of anti-inflammatories, steroid injections and, in worst cases, surgery.

This focus on only the areas where the pain shows up means that the diagnosis may be one of a variety of 'overuse' conditions, for example, carpal tunnel syndrome (if it happens to be the wrist), medial & lateral epicondylitis (elbow), thoracic outlet syndrome (base of throat) or frozen shoulder. In fact, all are RSI conditions generally caused by restrictions in the soft tissues (muscles, fascia and other connective tissues) in the neck and shoulder area which can impinge on the brachial plexus (nerves leading to the arm) where they exit through the cervical vertebrae (top part of the spine) and travel across the upper ribcage to the arm.

Any restrictions in soft tissues will also cause trigger points to develop, in muscles, fascia and even in the nerves themselves. This combination of localized restrictions, impingements and trigger points in the neck and shoulders creates referred pain patterns which are generally felt in the hands, wrists and forearms, although can spread into the upper arms, shoulders, neck, chest and back. This means that treatment focused just on the areas where pain is felt may give short-term relief but does not address the root cause of the problem and the symptoms will therefore continue to return in the longer term.

In my complementary therapy practice I see many clients with RSI, most of whom have initially followed the NHS medical treatment path but, keen to avoid surgery, have subsequently tried a combination of bodywork treatments with varying degrees of success.

They are often well informed about their condition, although may have gathered a number of facts which are conflicting if not downright confusing. A common misconception, for example, is that they were fine until one day when something they did brought on their symptoms, which have since worsened. It is far more likely that their repetitive keyboarding or guitar playing over several years has created layers of tissue restrictions which initially caused intermittent and seemingly unconnected symptoms before one day tipping over into the pain and discomfort they are now suffering.

One of my first tasks, therefore, is to talk with my clients so that they properly understand the nature of their condition, how it occurred and why it is persisting. We can then develop a programme of therapy tailored to the individual, which includes hands-on bodywork, homecare exercises and a reassessment of their work station setup and daily working habits. Together, these elements form the key to enabling them to return to normal daily life without constant pain and discomfort.

During therapy sessions, most of my work is focused on their neck & shoulders, using myofascial release and trigger point therapy to gradually break down restrictions in the soft tissues supporting the joints of the cervical spine and shoulder.

'Gradual' is the key word here as the tissues will release only a little at a time, mainly due to the layers of restrictions that have built up. Between sessions I ask my clients to do simple stretching and mobility exercises to maintain the benefits of therapy. Over time, we look at ways in which they can improve their work environment, which can include rearranging their work station, using different equipment and building more regular breaks into their day.

By using this more collaborative approach to RSI conditions, I find that my clients feel empowered and become more positive again about life in general, as they feel the changes we make working. As Christmas approaches, many are looking forward to enjoying their festive period along with everyone else.