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Is Your Laptop Hurting You?

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Do you write your papers with your laptop on your lap while you're curled up on the couch? If so, you may be hurting yourself more than you think. Those stiff shoulders and achy fingers are warning signs of more serious injuries and are not just normal side-effects of writing a 20-page English paper.

"Laptop computers were originally designed as portable, compact computers for use on the road," explains the University of Western Ontario's website, "It's this compact design that adds to the potential for ergonomic risk with prolonged use."

In other words, if you're using your laptop for your main computer, you're using it more than you should.

The problem is that it is impossible to adjust both your screen and your keyboard to ergonomically correct positions. You can have your keyboard at the right height and crank your head down to see the screen or you can have the screen at the right height and have your wrists, shoulders, and arms suffer the consequences. Neither is an appealing option.

And the consequences are serious. What starts as a mild tingle or ache in your fingers could progress to the point where you can't even hold a cup of coffee. At that point, you may end up having to take weeks or even months off of school or work to recover.

The trick is to prevent the injury before it develops. Be aware of your laptop usage, pay attention to those aches and pains you feel, and seek help if you need it. Otherwise, you may end up having an all too valid reason for not getting your homework done in time.

Don't toss that laptop yet. Here are a few tips to help you keep using your laptop and not end up sore:

- **Sit properly.** The couch is probably not the best place to use your laptop. Sit up straight with your feet flat on the ground.
- **Use external devices.** Plus a separate mouse and keyboard into your laptop and use them instead of the ones on the laptop.
- **Adjust your monitor height.** Your monitor's height should be about 20 degrees below your eye level. Use books or a box to lift rest your laptop up that high.
- **Take frequent breaks.** Get up and stretch your muscles. Grab a glass of water. Or a beer, whichever you prefer.
- **Look away.** Your eyes need breaks too. Look away from your screen and stare at the poster on your wall for a few seconds every once in awhile. Try not to get distracted by it.
- **Wrists up.** Avoid resting your wrists on your desk while typing or using your mouse. The wrist pads are only for use when you're not moving your hands.