

Guide to fighting off common health issues writers face.

Black Belt Guide to Writers:Health

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**Black Belt Guide**

# **Writer:Health**

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# Writer:Health

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## JOINT PROBLEMS

In simplest terms, joints are damaged by:

- ❖ motion (repetitive and/or improper)
- ❖ lack of motion.

Let's look at how those two factors affect different joints.

### WRIST

Damage to the wrists can be caused by the repetitive motion of typing and by holding the wrist immobile for long periods of time. Getting thoughts onto paper has always depended on the skilled movement of the fingers and wrist, motions that are a fertile ground for carpal tunnel syndrome (CTS). CTS has plagued writers since scribes were dipping quills in ink.

The wrist is made up of two rows of carpals (small bones). These two rows form a flexible hinge. The median nerve and other structures pass through a tunnel in the center of the bones. Wrists are designed for flexion, extension, abduction, adduction, and circumduction. The wrist-joint itself (*articulatio radiocarpea*) is a condyloid articulation which allows three degrees of freedom. This variety of movement allows it to remain flexible and causes the supporting muscles to stay strong, providing proper support to the bones.

Repetitive limited range of movement motions especially with wrists bent and body-posture incorrect, can cause inflammation of the tendons of the wrist by putting pressure on (and resulting in damage to) the median nerve. The median nerve controls the thumb, the first three fingers, and the palm of the hand. This includes any motion that requires use of the wrist (typing, writing with pen or pencil, etc.). Bent wrists and

incorrect body posture amplify the damaging effect.

The damage results in inflammation in the intra-skeletal structure of the joint. Our definition of inflammation for the purpose of this manual will include any chronic joint pain resulting from the deteriorating effects of incorrect or lack of movement, sedentary habits, incorrect posture, poor nutrition and dehydration.

The American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons says that the tolerance an individual's body has before developing CTS is largely based on heredity. If you have relatives with CTS, you're at even greater risk for it.

Initial symptoms of CTS often include numbness, faint or intermittent pain, tingling and extreme pain in the thumb, index and middle fingers that can radiate as far as the shoulder. If left untreated, the inflammation can lead to atrophy of the thumb muscles and chronic, severe pain. Currently, injections of corticosteroids and surgery are the most prevalent treatment so you're better off preventing it in the first place.

The keys to preventing CTS are:

- ❖ Correct Posture
- ❖ Regular Breaks
- ❖ Simple Exercise and stretching
- ❖ Proper Nutrition

Let's look at each of these causes individually.

## **POSTURE**

Posture is of primary importance, and plays a role in avoiding many of the health pitfalls that lie in wait for writers. Here's your checklist:

- ❖ Back: straight
- ❖ Knees: bent
- ❖ Feet: flat on floor.
- ❖ Elbows: bent at 35 degree angle.
- ❖ Wrists and forearms straight.
- ❖ Computers screen: top of screen 2-4 inches lower than line of sight looking straight ahead.

Your equipment must support this posture to avoid injury. A good chair is a must. There are also several excellent cushions available at most chiropractic offices that will help keep your back in the correct position. Keyboard pads and cushions that will help to straighten the wrists. Remember, the bent wrist held steady for long periods of time puts pressure on the nerve, and this is what you must avoid.

## **REGULAR BREAKS**

When you are working, you may lose track of time. It's crucial to take care of the instruments of your craft (your hands), and thus you must discipline yourself to remember to take breaks.

- ❖ Ideal: a five-minute break for every 35 minutes of work
- ❖ Set a timer.
- ❖ Put the timer five steps away so you have to get up and walk to shut it off. This will ensure that you don't just reach over and hit the button and continue working.



## **STRETCH AND EXERCISE**

During the break walk about and gently stretch your arms, shoulders and wrists by doing this:

- ❖ Grasp your fingertips and gently pull back 10 times per hand.
- ❖ Close your fists and rotate the wrist gently and slowly another 10 times.
- ❖ Put your hands down at your sides and then pull your shoulders forward and backward 10 times, then ‘shrug’ the shoulders up and down for another 10.
- ❖ Straighten an arm and lay it diagonally across your chest and then hook the other arm under and give it a 10 second hug, then switch. (You can help your legs at the same time by standing with your feet apart and your knees bent while you do these stretches).
- ❖ Spend the rest of the five minutes holding a small ice pack between your wrists to discourage the start of inflammation.

Now, reset the timer and go back to work!

If you are the kind of typist who has a consistent rhythm, let it become a habit to alter that rhythm every 15 minutes or so. One way to remind yourself is to actually write FAST and SLOW in different places in your draft: another is to stick small notes on either side of your screen.

At the same time as you change your speed, also alter the position of your hands, even if it is only by one or two inches. Try to keep the whole arm moving when the fingers are working, occasionally removing the pads, leaning back slightly, and working for five minutes while deliberately holding the forearms

and wrists off the surface and very straight. (To keep your arms straight, imagine a straight rod running from the tip of your middle knuckle to the center of your elbow.)

Try to insure that, where possible, objects touch the palm of your hand when you pick them up, instead of using just the fingertips to lift. This will keep you from exerting additional pressure on the wrist.

Flexing/strengthening exercises are also helpful: try placing your fingers inside a plastic cup and pushing outward 10-12 times, switch hands and repeat. Done as sets of 3 twice per day, this helps keep the hands stronger and varies the pressure on the muscles.

Keep your workplace warm (70°): cold inhibits good circulation!

## NUTRITION

Since CTS is an inflammation-caused nerve transmission issue, it makes sense to tailor your diet and supplementation to help fight inflammation and maximize nerve support. Supplements might include:

- ❖ 100 mg B-Complex capsule once a day with a meal,
- ❖ a good multivitamin that does not contain iron (taken as directed) and
- ❖ 60 mg Coenzyme Q10 every morning preferably in liquid-capsule (gel cap) form.
- ❖ Gingko Biloba is an herb many people depend upon for good circulation (take as directed), and
- ❖ Zinc is vital to the body's repair system (don't exceed 100 mg. of zinc per day and include the zinc that is in the multiple).
- ❖ MSM (base sulfur) This is not a sulfa drug, which many people are allergic to. It is base sulfur that is essential

in the body. 3000 mg per day, in divided doses, may be beneficial for inflammation.

- ❖ Black Cherry Extract, take by capsule, has been reported to cut inflammation, especially inflammation caused by acidity.
- ❖ Proteolytic Enzymes such as Zyfla-Mend (take as directed) have been reported to work wonders
- ❖ Cats Claw tea (sip 2-3 cups per day) is another option

## **HIPS AND KNEES**

While CTS is caused by repetitive and improper motion, other joints suffer from the lack of movement in a writer's lifestyle. Much like the wrist joint, knees and hips have specific designs and require those to be taken into account in order to keep the joints working properly and pain-free. They can be severely damaged from inflammation caused by lack of motion.

## **THE JOINTS**

The hip, in common reference, has two sets of moving parts: the greater trochanter (the end projection of the femur), with its associated fat and muscle tissue., and the acetabulofemoral which lies between the femur and the notch of the pelvis. Its primary function is to support the body when it is *moving* or *standing*. It has an even greater range of motion than the wrist (2<sup>nd</sup> most flexible joint in the body, 1<sup>st</sup> being the shoulder) so it stands to reason that this joint finds a static position (i.e. sitting without movement) erosive if exposed to it daily for hours on end.

The knee is actually composed of two separate joints, the femoro-patellar and the femoro-tibial, which are surrounded by thick synovial fluid to reduce friction. The joints are designed to

*flex* and *extend*, with very slight capabilities for lateral rotation. Lacking the versatility of the wrist or hip, the knee's topmost extension is 160°, and that is when the joint is passively flexed. Its lateral rotation is limited to 30° with a mere 10° medial rotation. This means that the knee joint has specific duties, and none of them are served by sitting still for long periods of time.

## MOVEMENT

We have already discussed the move that must happen every 35 minutes, but a longer break (30-35 minutes) at least once per day is just as essential.

- ❖ Set aside time daily
- ❖ Walk

Deadlines always come too fast, no matter how long you have to prepare for them. A 'streak' can get your mind racing and your body is ignored while the creative stream is pouring out, but disciplined care of the body is called for in order to capitalize on your work efforts. It is very romantic to think of becoming famous posthumously. However, being around to reap the rewards of your creative work is much preferable to leaving it to your heirs. In light of this, you must find some time every day, no matter what, to move around!

A simple walk around the block is unquestionably beneficial, but if your block does not accommodate that, then a treadmill is a good substitute. Most people think that a treadmill (or any other piece of home exercise equipment) is largely designed to be an expensive clothes hanger, but rest assured that these items work best when used for, well, exercise! So get up from the desk, stretch a little, walk for 20-30 minutes and you will come back refreshed. Your body will thank you for it and reward you with better circulation, increased focus and concentration, alleviation of stress-effects and much less pain.

## **TOPICAL RELIEF**

If you are dealing with local and active inflammation, a topical remedy may be preferable to a systemic one. Taking aspirin, ibuprofen and other NSAIDS orally will spread them over the whole body, and if your kidneys aren't the source of the problem, why saturate them (or any other organ) with a remedy? Wintergreen oil, DMSO, aloe concentrate, capsicum and topical rubs containing combinations of these are available in most health food stores. Sci-Fit makes a balm (SPR) that also includes ibuprofen. Do not use a heating pad: dry heat can aggravate an already-inflamed area.

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