



23 May 2022

Aussies at risk of developing 'Tech Neck' as pandemic leads to increased time spent scrolling on mobile devices

Spinal Health Week is a timely reminder for Australians to check if their lifestyle behaviours are not causing any damage to their spinal health that can lead to serious health issues down the track.

- **COVID-19 pandemic sees Australians spending more time on their phones:** Since the pandemic, many Australians have increased the usage of their mobile devices to scroll through social media (50%) stream content (44%), shop (48%), and work (27%), sacrificing exercising (28%), sleeping (22%), and meeting with friends/family (20%) to do so at the same time.ⁱ
- **Spike in hours spent scrolling through mobile devices giving the nation 'Tech Neck':** 60 degrees of neck flexion can place up to 27 kg of weight through the spine, causing an increase in the mid-back curvature, commonly known as 'Tech Neck', which can potentially generate a burden on physical and mental health.ⁱⁱ
- **Australians' wellbeing and social life affected by neck issues:** 39% of Australians have been experiencing neck pain in the last 12 months, and while over a third (34%) admits it has caused physical exhaustion, its impact goes far beyond physical symptoms, including sleep loss (52%) and mental exhaustion (32%).ⁱ
- **The nation is encouraged to safeguard their neck health this Spinal Health Week:** The Australian Chiropractors Association (ACA) has developed a five-step cheat sheet to help Australians care for their neck health.

This Health Spinal Week (23 – 29 May 2022), the Australian Chiropractors Association (ACA) is encouraging all Australians to check if their lifestyle is affecting their neck health and seek professional help if needed.

The call from chiropractors comes as the ACA's new consumer research shows that in the past year, Australians have been experiencing an increase in neck-related health issues, which have been impacting not only their physical health but also emotional and mental wellbeing.ⁱ

Neck discomfort (42%), neck stiffness (42%), neck pain (39%), tension headaches (36%), and migraines (25%) were the most common neck-related issues reported by Australians in the past 12 months. While over a third (34%) admitted their pain has caused physical exhaustion and forced them to be less mobile (21%), the impact of neck pain goes far beyond physical symptoms, with more than half of those surveyed experiencing sleep loss (52%), mental exhaustion (32%), lowered concentration levels (39%), feeling more irritated (38%) and affecting people's ability to work (21%).ⁱ

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, people all over the world have been using the internet 50-70% more than before the pandemicⁱⁱⁱ, with 50% of the time spent on social media, resulting in a whopping 5.5 hours per day on their phones on average,^{iv} and, according to ACA, there is a clear link between a pandemic-related spike in neck issues and hours spent on scrolling through web pages or applications on a mobile device:

"The human head weighs about five kilograms. However, as the neck bends forward and down, the weight on the cervical spine begins to increase: research shows 60 degrees of neck flexion can place up to 27 kg of weight through the spine, and this prolonged time spent hunching over the phone can cause a wide range of symptoms including an increase in the mid-back curvature, commonly known as 'Tech Neck'.ⁱⁱ Over time, Tech Neck can lead to early wear-and-tear on the spine, degeneration, and even the need for surgery to address damage caused," said Dr David Cahill, ACA President.

ACA's research shows that as a nation, Aussies have been spending more time on mobile devices. Many said that the increased time is spent on scrolling through social media (50%) working (27%), shopping (48%), streaming content (44%), and communicating (37%). The increase in mobile phone use has meant a decrease in other, healthier lifestyle practices with many admitting to sacrificing exercising (28%), going for walks (26%), sleeping (22%), meeting with friends/family (20%), taking care of the house, and reading books (19%). As a result, almost a third (30%) said that, on average, every hour they reach for their phone between 5-30 times, and one in ten (9%) admitted to even doing so more than 30 times.ⁱ

The nation's tendency to sacrifice healthy lifestyle choices is taking its toll on Australians' spinal health. Dr Cahill explained:



“We know that regular exercise can improve pain and quality of life in those with neck pain.^v However, our research shows that over a quarter (28%) of Australians are sacrificing their physical activity to spend more time on their phones and admitted that they have been working out less in the last 12 months”.

Chiropractors - healthcare professionals who specifically care for a patient's neuromusculoskeletal system and help manage back and neck pain through the use of spinal adjustments to maintain good alignment - want Australians to safeguard their quality of life and wellbeing by taking the time to assess their spinal health and address any aches or pains they may be feeling and seek the appropriate treatment.

Dr Cahill suggested: *“Taking care of your spine does not need to be complicated or expensive. There are many things people can incorporate into their day-to-day routine that can improve their spinal health or assess if they need professional assistance. For example, these are five easy things people can incorporate into their daily life to help safeguard and improve their neck health:*

- **20/20 breaks:** when using your phone or working take short, 20-second breaks, every 20 minutes to stand up, move and stretch.
- **Chin tucks:** incorporate chin tucks into your daily routine – when working or using your phone, do 5-10 chin tucks every hour. Start in a seated position with your shoulders relaxed, look straight forward, place a finger on the chin, and without moving the finger, pull the chin and head straight back until a good stretch is felt at the base of the head and top of the neck (there should now be some separation between the chin and finger). Hold for 5 seconds if possible and bring the chin forward again to the finger.
- **Change how you hold your phone:** Bring the screen to eye level so your head is not slouched forward or too high. Instead, keep a neutral spine so your ear is in line with your shoulders.
- **Consider your sleeping position and set up:** if you sleep on your stomach and wake up with a stiff/sore neck consider switching to side sleeping. Having the right sleeping setup also matters, ensure that your pillow is supportive, and is the right height for your body size and sleep position. If you lie mostly on your side the pillow should keep your neck in a straight position, without tilting up or down. If you lie mostly on your back, the pillow will need to be thinner so that your head is not pushed forward.
- **Stay active:** Include regular walks in your day, minimum of five minutes, every hour. If you work out regularly, focus on your core muscles as they help keep your body stable and balanced, and protect your spine, including the neck.”

If you are concerned about your neck health following two years of lockdown and disrupted routine, consider visiting your local ACA chiropractor to help support good spinal health and improve overall wellbeing.

To find your local ACA chiropractor visit: chiro.org.au/find-a-chiro

– ENDS –

About the Australian Chiropractors Association

The Australian Chiropractors Association (ACA) is the leading voice for chiropractors in Australia, actively working to further the profession of chiropractic by improving the health of all Australians.

About the survey

A nationally representative survey of Australian adults was commissioned by the Australian Chiropractors Association and conducted by Pure Profile in April 2022, to explore experience with neck-related pains and issues, pain management and the change in lifestyle behaviours, physical and mental health in the past 12 months. 1,003 Australian adults from all states and territories completed the survey.

References:

ⁱ Consumer research conducted by Pure Profile, April 2022.

ⁱⁱ Text Neck Syndrome in Children and Adolescents. Available at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7914771/>. Accessed in April 2022.

ⁱⁱⁱ Social Connectedness, Excessive Screen Time During COVID-19 and Mental Health: A Review of Current Evidence. Available at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fhumd.2021.684137/full>. Accessed in April 2022.

^{iv} Aussies spend almost 17 years in a lifetime staring at their phones. Available at: <https://www.reviews.org/au/mobile/aussie-screentime-in-a-lifetime/>. Accessed in April 2022.

^v Effectiveness of exercise in office workers with neck pain: A systematic review and meta-analysis. Available at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6093121/>. Accessed in April 2022.