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Prevent Wrist Burnout! Carpal Tunnel Syndrome Advisory

By Nancy Sheehan, LMT

Are you experiencing numbness, burning and tingling, or episodes of frequent, recurring pain? Oops, what's happening here? Carpal tunnel syndrome, or repetitive strain injury (RSI) are catch-all terms for a host of disorders that may account for your symptoms. Although these cumulative trauma disorders and over-use syndromes are rampant among our online generation, the beneficial effects of treatments based on yoga and massage have only recently become widely publicized.

True carpal tunnel syndrome occurs when the eight finger flexor tendons swell and cause impingement on the median nerve as it goes through the carpal tunnel in the wrist. When the median nerve is entrapped, pressure increases in the tunnel, starving the nerve of much needed oxygen. This makes the hand tingle, feel numb, or become so weak that you can't grip things normally. These symptoms can also result from tightness in the forearm, shoulder or neck. For example, the pectoralis minor and scalene muscles can impinge on the arm nerves, causing pain down into the hand. As a result, treatment of carpal tunnel symptoms should be treated with a holistic approach.

Recent research has suggested that yoga can help sufferers of carpal tunnel syndrome. For example, a 1998 study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* by senior Iyengar yoga teacher Marion S. Garfinkel, Ed.D (280: 1601-03) demonstrated that an Iyengar yoga-based regimen was more effective than wrist splinting or no treatment in relieving some symptoms and signs of carpal tunnel syndrome. The yoga group reported significant improvements in grip strength and pain reduction compared to control subjects who did not receive any yoga instruction.

Everyone wants to feel healthy as we move about the world, but what we often

find after a long day at the computer, or an evening spent engaging in repetitive hobbies such as knitting, is that the action of repeatedly moving the same muscles over and over again along the same pathways causes the muscles to tighten. And performing the same movements many times a day over a long period of time can literally wear out the tissues. What begins as a minor irritation can eventually progress to a severe injury. These micro-tears set up the conditions for chronic inflammation, and



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like threads on a rope, some of the collagen fibers will tear. When enough fibers tear swelling ensues, resulting in pinched nerves and the classic neurological symptoms of weakness and tingling. Thus, repetitive muscle use crosses the fine line from strong and healthy to short and tight.

We can address these micro-traumas! Over time, as the intensity of the micro-trauma increases, the autonomic nervous system receives the message of injury and initiates the inflammation response. Pressure increases because one of the side effects of the inflammation response is a shortening of the muscle. Normally, tendons glide easily in their sheaths – but any change in tension to the musculature will increase inflammation in the tendons, causing irritation, swelling

and even squeezing of the median nerve.

A regular yoga practice that focuses on upper extremity alignment can counteract these effects. To determine if yoga can help, begin by checking your alignment. This sounds easy enough but perfect shoulder placement can be elusive. If your shoulders slouch, slump or cave-inward, practice feeling your chest rise. Check that your shoulder blades are lying back instead of winging out. Fortunately, you don't have to live with poor posture. If approached with patience, persistence and gentleness, corrective yoga exercises can yield excellent results. Improved posture has a huge impact, not just on the wrists, but on all parts of the body.

How do we regain muscle memory and proper resting length of any muscle? Recruit a skilled deep tissue massage therapist who is familiar with altering structure and relaxing muscle restrictions. Remember, nerve impulses begin upstream in the neck. By addressing these tight postural muscles and focusing on realigning scar tissue, muscle memory can be reprogrammed, allowing for proper resting length. This will reduce the tension in the tendons as they glide in their sheaths. Pressure on the median nerve is then reduced and relief is on its way!

I have found that the combination of yoga and massage therapies have a powerful synergy when they are applied to repetitive strain injuries such as carpal tunnel syndrome. Skillful deep tissue massage can lengthen and relax tight postural muscles while ongoing yoga practice can bring these newly lengthened muscles back into proper alignment. 🙏

Nancy Sheehan is owner/director of Cranbury Therapeutic Massage and is certified in Traditional Thai Massage, as well as Shiatsu, Swedish and Neuromuscular Therapies. For more information visit cranburymassage.com.