

Is Your Vision Causing Muscle Tension?

Mary Betts Sinclair

Do you have tension headaches or chronic tension in your upper body? How about neck and shoulder stiffness? Maybe you experience strain in the temples, forehead, neck, shoulders, or back, especially after a long period of working at a computer or reading a book? If so, your tension could be related to how you look at the world.

Healthy vision is comfortable, efficient, and relaxed for the viewer, while poor visual habits can interfere with free and easy movement, making the body chronically tense. We use our eyes much of the day, and if we strain to see, we create tension in the face, neck, shoulders, and back muscles. Squinting and straining when we have trouble

few years of life. A lazy eye, for example, may cause a child to hike up one eye or one shoulder, or twist the neck to look out of the better-sighted eye at all times. Being sensitive to light might cause a child to develop the habit of hanging the head forward. Injuries to or near the eyes can also cause chronic tension in the muscles of the eyes or structures near the eyes. And finally, emotional stress can cause us to hold our muscles tight while we look out at the world.

What To Do

STEP ONE

Talk with your massage therapist about your pain and strain. During a session, your therapist can check you for extra

*"Independence
is happiness."*

-Susan B. Anthony



Poor visual habits can interfere with free and easy movement

making something out, or stiffening our entire neck, spine, and pelvis every time we look up can affect the entire body.

Most of us develop these vision habits without even being aware of them, but there are other health factors that can play a role. Up to 5 percent of children are born with some kind of visual abnormality, or develop one in the first

tension in and around the eyes, neck, and shoulders, then fine-tune massage techniques to help relieve your discomfort. Relaxation exercises, as well as hot and cold packs, can offer additional relief.

STEP TWO

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Office Hours and Contact

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Do daily eye muscle stretches, practice self-massage, and use hot and cold packs over your eyes. Your massage therapist can show you how to use these easy, inexpensive aids.

STEP THREE

Your bodyworker may also refer you to another health-care professional who can help you reduce built-up tension. For example, a behavioral optometrist can check to make sure your glasses are the right prescription and help you learn better visual habits; a Feldenkrais practitioner can help you change old habits, see with less strain, and understand how emotional stress might be affecting your eyes; and an ergonomic expert can help adapt your office workstation so that it protects and does not strain your eyes.

Relief for Computer Users

According to the American Optometric Association, 46 percent of Americans spend at least 5 hours a day on a computer or smartphone. When looking at a screen, many people hold their head forward of center and slouch, which puts many upper-body muscles in a shortened position. These visual habits are now creating whole-body strain. In addition to head-forward posture, prolonged twisting of the head can tighten muscles in the back of the neck. At the computer, the greater the glare, the smaller the font size, and the poorer the resolution, the more likely it is that the person will strain to see and develop tightness in the upper shoulders.

Here are some ways to avoid pain and strain:

Computer users tend to blink very little and stare straight ahead, not using their peripheral vision. Be sure to keep blinking, which washes your eyes in naturally therapeutic tears and breaks up your stare.

Take frequent rest breaks using the 20-20 Rule: every 20 minutes, spend 20 seconds looking at something far away, preferably gazing out a window. Also, stand up and move as much as possible. This is a great time to do eye-muscle stretches and range-of-motion exercises for your back and neck. Use your fingertips to gently massage around your eyes, temples, and

forehead. Finally, rub your palms together and gently cup your closed eyes. Relax and breathe freely.

Make sure you have good light, and check that your monitor is the correct distance away from your eyes and at the right height. Also, adjust the screen settings to where they are comfortable in terms of resolution and flicker.

If you wear eyeglasses, have them checked. For example, in order for some people to see clearly with their heads held in an upright and balanced position, without chronic tightness in the back of the neck, they may need to have a prescription for a longer focal length or larger bifocal inserts, or have an adjustment of their eyeglass frames if they are bent or twisted. Some people may need a stronger or weaker prescription. If your doctor has prescribed a pair of glasses specifically

for seeing the computer screen, wear them.

Mary Betts Sinclair is an Oregon-based educator and bodyworker. Learn more about her at www.marybettssinclair.com.



Your massage therapist can check for tension

Stay Hydrated

Jennie Hastings Stancu

Has your therapist told you about the importance of drinking water?

After all, our bodies are composed of approximately 60 percent water, and all of our bodily functions are sustained by water. Dehydration is one of the most common detriments to our health, and one of the easiest problems to fix. Make staying hydrated simple and seamlessly interwoven throughout your day.

START EACH DAY OFF RIGHT

Start your morning with a tall, room-temperature glass of water with lemon squeezed into it, before you start taking any tea, coffee, or food. Front-loading hydration is helpful to the body. And be luxurious with your water--for a special treat, add mint, cucumber, or lemon.

HALF YOUR WEIGHT

It is difficult to know how much water is enough. One rule of thumb is to take half your body weight in pounds, and drink that many ounces of water per day.

So if you weigh 150 pounds, this would equal 75 ounces of water. For many of us, however, this might not be enough. If you are working hard, or you live in a particularly dry climate, you might need to drink even more than this.

WHAT ABOUT BPA?

You've probably seen the phrase "BPA free" on water bottles, and you may want to gravitate toward these. BPA stands for bisphenol A, which is a chemical found in polycarbonate plastics and epoxy resins.

According to Mayoclinic.org, some research has shown BPA can seep from a container into foods and beverages, and this is concerning because of possible health effects BPA has on the brain and behavior. Look for non-plastic bottles, or look for the "BPA free" logo.

OTHER DRINKS

Drinking herbal tea is a good way to stay hydrated. You can also augment your hydration with electrolyte-fortified water or sports drinks. However, be

aware that a lot of these drinks have incredibly high levels of sugar in them. Hydration isn't a healthy habit if you drink a day's worth of sugar in every glass. So check the label before you buy.

Jennie Hastings Stancu is a licensed massage therapist and author.



Stay hydrated to keep your body functioning optimally

Healthy Grilling Tips

Summertime and grills go together like a hot dog and mustard. But could that hot dog actually be doing you harm? Alice Bender, registered dietician at the American Institute for Cancer, says that diets high in beef, pork, and lamb, as well as processed meats like hot dogs, are linked to an increased risk of colon cancer. She suggests that sticking with chicken and fish can "make this summer's backyard grilling both healthier and more flavorful." Use herbs and spices to amp up flavor, and try marinating for 30 minutes before you grill, which can reduce the amount of heterocyclic amines--the potentially cancer-causing compounds formed when grilling.

Here are some other tips to help reduce health risks associated with the grill:

TRIM THE FAT

Fat can increase smoke, which may contain carcinogens, so choose leaner meats and trim excess fat.

DON'T BURN IT

Charred, well-done meat can increase your risk of pancreatic cancer, according to a study from the University of Minnesota.

BUT COOK IT THROUGH

Make sure that you hit the USDA recommendations for internal temperature, which can be found at www.foodsafety.gov.

MORE VEGGIES!

Grilling vegetables does not create the same heterocyclic amines as grilling meats. Plus, veggies have less fat and cholesterol in general.

KEEP IT CLEAN

Don't let a charred mess build up on your grill, because it will eventually find its way onto your food.

*"Keep your face
always toward
the sunshine and
shadows will fall
behind you."*

-Walt Whitman

Hot summer indeed. Looking for cool activities like swimming, boating, snorkeling, diving, fishing, jet skiing, parasailing & water skiing to bring you refreshing exercise & movement? Movement aides in rotating joints, building muscles, stimulating circulation & increasing cell activity. Enjoy some pleasurable activities! Best, Julia

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