

# Wellness News

## 'BlackBerry Thumb' – Are You at Risk?



Oh, that BlackBerry is so sweet, isn't it? But watch out for the thorny issue of "BlackBerry thumb!"

Repetitive motion issues, which have long afflicted computer users and video gamers, have invaded the handheld world. The informal name for the malady – "BlackBerry thumb" has become the phrase that encompasses a variety of repetitive stress injuries of the hand, and the thumbs in particular. A result of overusing small gadget keypads for text messaging, e-mailing, and trackball spooling through music lists and address books, the throbbing pain associated with BlackBerry thumb can manifest itself not only in your thumb, but your wrists as well. Continued stress on the tendons, nerves and ligaments in your hands and arms can potentially lead to long-term problems such as carpal tunnel syndrome and tendonitis.

The thumb is a very mobile joint, but is designed to function as a stabilizer for pinching and gripping with the fingers. While a full-sized typing keyboard is designed for quick strikes by the more nimble fingers, the thumbs are relegated to hitting only the spacebar. For the more than 12 million BlackBerry, smartphone and PDA users worldwide, this upgrade of the lowly thumb to fifth finger status comes with an upgraded risk of injury as well — particularly for people old enough to be developing arthritis.

While no national statistics exist on how many people suffer from this type of thumb ailment, the American Society of Hand Therapists has issued several consumer alerts since 2005 regarding the proper use of handheld devices. In conjunction with these alerts, the American Society of Hand Therapists also released a list of usage guidelines

and exercises to help technology devotees avoid painful hand and arm injuries.

- If you experience pain during the activity, stop. Pain is one of the ways your body lets you know that you are overexerting a particular muscle group.
- Use a neutral grip when holding the device. A neutral grip is when the wrist is straight, not bent in either direction.
- Take a break every few minutes or switch to a different activity. Stretch your fingers and thumb. Repetitive motions can lead to tendon or nerve irritation.
- Whenever possible use the device supported on a desk or tabletop. Use a wrist rest, gel pad, or place pillows in your lap and rest your arms on the pillows. This will not only support your arms, but also allow you to keep your head in a more upright position and decrease neck strain.
- Sit in an appropriate chair. This is a chair that enables you to put both feet on the floor and provides good back support.
- Switch hands frequently and vary the use of fingers/digits.
- Frequently look away from the screen and focus on a distant object.

### How to Cure 'BlackBerry Thumb'

If your hand pain has reached a level of pain to where you are seeking relief, several options are available to you. You may be able to alleviate mild symptoms yourself by simply reducing the amount of thumb typing you are doing and allowing your hands to rest. Application of ice to the affected area will reduce swelling and help to decrease pain. Occupational or physical therapy is a

good choice for treating long-lasting deep-seated pain and discomfort. A Certified Hand Therapist can instruct you in ergonomics, along with a program of stretches and exercises to increase your awareness of your body mechanics and reduce your symptoms. Your therapist may also utilize massage, electrical stimulation and other pain relieving modalities, or fit you for a hand orthotic or "splint" to stabilize the thumb and help it to rest.

If your pain is severe, your physician may administer a cortisone injection. Surgery may be considered as an option of last resort.

Remember, "BlackBerry thumb" is a syndrome – a collection of markers and symptoms, and not a singular medical diagnosis. Listen to your body! Don't give up your BlackBerry or iPod – just give it a rest once in a while.

For more information, contact Terri Wolfe OTR/L, CHT, at 814/453-4743 or Terri@ErieHandCenter.com, or visit [www.ErieHandCenter.com](http://www.ErieHandCenter.com).

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