

# Safe laptop use for staff

Laptops are a useful educational tool if used for appropriate periods and attention is given to their proper use. This factsheet outlines some key considerations in the safe use of laptops.

NEW SOUTH WALES  
DEPARTMENT  
OF EDUCATION  
AND TRAINING



**OHS Directorate**

FACT SHEET

## Potential injuries

Laptops are not designed for prolonged use.

Improper use of a laptop may cause injuries including thumb and finger pain or numbness, wrist pain, elbow pain, shoulder and neck pain, upper and lower back pain, leg falling asleep or leg discomfort and eye strain and headaches.

Back complaints are one of the most common reasons for people visiting their GP in Australia. Many adults are unable to undertake work or recreation due to spinal pain and disability. Chronic spinal pain has implications for the individual and also for the wider community as it costs millions of dollars in lost productivity.

## Main problems with poor practice and use of laptops

- Lack of adjustability of the height of the work surface, screen and keyboard, can result in the arms being held too high or the neck bent to view the screen.
- If poor postures are adopted frequently or for long periods, musculoskeletal injury may result.
- If the screen is tilted upward to reduce bending of the neck, reflections can be a problem.
- Carrying laptops may contribute to back and neck problems.

## Recommended practices for using laptops

To reduce the risk of injury, laptops must be used correctly. Get into good habits before the aching starts as neck, shoulder and back problems build up over time. Some simple solutions include:

### Chair

- Adjust the height of your chair to use the keyboard and mouse. After making this height adjustment if your feet cannot be placed flat on the floor, use a footrest. This encourages good posture, enables proper sitting height, avoids pressure placed on the back of the thigh and promotes circulation.
- Adopt a good sitting posture with lower back support.

### Mouse

- Instead of using the small constricted touchpad or trackball, you may choose to use an external mouse (if available).
- Place the mouse on the side of the hand that is most comfortable. This places the arms in a neutral and relaxed position and prevents overreaching and twisting of the shoulder, arm and wrist.

### Keyboard

- Do not pound the keys. With laptops, the touch is often lighter and the keyboard bed is shallow.
- Position the keyboard so that your forearms are parallel to your thighs when your feet are flat on the floor. This helps maintain blood flow in the hands and arms and decreases muscle strain and tension.
- You may choose to use an external keyboard where possible (if available).

### Monitor

- Centre the monitor in front of you at a comfortable viewing distance from the screen. This places the body in a neutral position.
- Position the laptop to minimise reflective glare from overhead, windows or surrounding light sources.
- Adjust the screen so that the top is at eye level. This will reduce the need to bend your head forward and encourage the use of the eyes, instead of the neck, to adjust the line of vision.
- Clean the screen regularly; dust on the screen can make it difficult to read and increase eye strain.

*continued on p2*

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## Work area

- Never place a laptop on your lap. It is hot, uncomfortable and potentially dangerous to your health.
- Ensure adequate space is available and other regularly used equipment is within reach.
- You may choose to use a document holder (if available). Place it in front or next to the monitor. This prevents neck and eye strain.
- Create a surface that allows for the following body positioning while typing and using a mouse:
  - Shoulders relaxed, not elevated or “shrugged”
  - Upper arms hanging by sides
  - Right angle at the elbow
  - Forearms, wrists and hands in alignment—no bent wrists
  - Fingers resting lightly on keys.
- Change position occasionally; sitting in one position for an extended period of time can interfere with circulation.

## Transporting the laptop

- When carrying a laptop:
  - Select a laptop bag designed to hold only the laptop and associated cords. Larger bags have a tendency to fill up with other items, making for a heavier load.
  - Use a bag with a padded shoulder strap and switch the laptop bag from shoulder to shoulder to relieve the weight.
  - Newer laptops are small enough to fit in backpacks so can be carried on the back and both shoulders, distributing the weight.
  - Use a laptop bag with wheels or a wheeled luggage cart.

- When placing the laptop in a vehicle (or putting it down anywhere), set the weight down close to the body. Avoid reaching across a car seat or deep into the trunk while holding the weight of the laptop.
- Eliminate the need to carry a laptop by using portable media storage (memory stick, flash cards).

## Take breaks

- Incorporate breaks every 20–30 minutes to rest eyes, stretch hands, muscles and joints; and to break up repetition and static postures.

