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Rheumatoid Arthritis and Computing

This document describes **Rheumatoid Arthritis** and how it can affect a person's ability to use a computer. AbilityNet and the National Rheumatoid Arthritis Society have teamed together to produce this factsheet, which describes the steps that can be taken to help overcome the difficulties caused by this disease, thus making computer use easier.

Rheumatoid Arthritis

Rheumatoid Arthritis (RA) can occur at any age, including children. There are around 400,00 adults in the UK with the condition and around 12,000 children under the age of 16 are affected. Many people experience disabling pain, stiffness and reduced joint function as well as severe fatigue, which can have a huge impact on quality of life for them and their families. It can affect organs as well as joints. You can see more information at www.rheumatoid.org.uk. RA is an auto-immune disease and quite different from osteo-arthritis which most people are probably familiar with.

The most common problems

The most common problems in using computers, occur from restricted mobility in hands, wrists, elbows, shoulders and neck. A typical example is pain and swelling in the wrist caused by long periods of keyboard and mouse use.

Get Round

A person with RA may well be able to continue with some or all of their computer use activities using an alternative technique, while still following medical advice and continuing with treatment. We call this getting round the problem and we have found it to be a very useful and under-used approach. Among the alternatives we work with are:

- Alternatives to a mouse.
- Small, light, standard-layout keyboards.
- Ergonomically designed keyboards.
- Voice input; now a reliable and highly developed technology.
- Alternative key input devices with radically different designs.

Example solutions

Not everyone experiences the same level of pain or discomfort when using a computer and so there is not a ready-made solution available. The following is a list of examples which have been provided by real computer users affected by Rheumatoid Arthritis and some of the steps they have taken to alleviate their difficulties.

Example 1. Wrists get very painful when using the keyboard and mouse. A keyboard Gel Pad has helped the user. A mouse Gel Pad made matters worse, because the pad lifts up the wrist too high causing more pain. A smaller laptop mouse (Logitech V200) made it easier. It's smaller and allows the base of the hand to rest on the mouse mat, which keeps the wrist straight. They also use a separate keyboard with their laptop. It has allowed for a better angle for the wrist and enabled the screen to be placed at a more convenient distance.



Logitech V200

Example 2. Pain and swelling in the wrists when using the mouse for long periods. The user has started using Microsoft keyboard shortcuts and now hardly uses the mouse at all. It's slower but less painful. They also use a navigator keyboard with pre-programmed buttons on it – Email, internet, save, print etc. This helps to reduce the number of keystrokes.



Logitech Navigator

Example 3. Swelling, pain and stiffness through keyboard and mouse use. The stiffness caused the user to consistently miss or hit the wrong keys. The user had a workplace assessment carried out. Recommendations included a 'keyguard' - Keyguards have two main functions: they provide a platform which the user can rest their hands on without pressing keys down; and they make it difficult to accidentally hit more than one key at a time.



Keyguard

Example 4. The user experienced sore wrists from using a mouse. They obtained a wrist rest, which is attached to the mouse pad. They also obtained a footrest and lumbar support to provide better posture when seated at the computer.



Kensington Wrist Pillow Mouse Pad

Example 5. The user has tried several types of trackball mice but eventually found that their laptop touchpad was the best solution. Typing on a keyboard was difficult and they resorted to using Voice Activated software. The only discomfort now experienced is from wearing a headset for any lengthy period.



Dragon Naturally Speaking

Example 6. The user has trouble using a standard mouse. They purchased a roller ball mouse to use with one hand, while they work with the other. They also manage to cope with a standard keyboard by typing with just two fingers.



Traxys Rollerball II Mouse

How We Can Help

Most of the examples have cited pain and discomfort associated with using a keyboard and mouse but the users have alleviated their difficulties by trying alternative solutions. You can view a list of these in our fact sheet on 'keyboard and mouse alternatives' and in the 'MyWay' skillsheets on keyboard and mouse adjustments. Just click the 'fact sheet' link on our website www.abilitynet.org.uk for a full list of both fact sheets and skill sheets.

Trial and error appears to be the most common way that many computer users find an acceptable solution to their difficulties, but this can be time consuming, expensive and no guarantee of success. In addition to fact sheets and skill sheets, AbilityNet can help you in a number of other other ways too.

Advice and Information

We are available, through this service, to anybody with a question or a concern. We can give factual information, explain our view or services, or simply discuss concerns. You can access this service either by phoning our freephone helpline **0800 269545** or by sending an email to enquiries@abilitynet.org.uk

Assessment

Our assessments integrate personal and technical considerations to arrive at sound and realistic suggestions, documented in a report. The process includes discussion, evaluation of all relevant circumstances and trial use of alternative devices.

We believe that individual attention is vital. Superficially similar cases may demand quite different approaches.

Awareness Training and Courses

AbilityNet offers training specifically directed at Rheumatiod Arthritis in a broader view, designed for professionals with interests and responsibilities in this area. We address prevention and management and effective DSE workstation assessment as well as individual cases.

Consultancy

We are frequently asked to work with employers to take a broad, long term view of computer system and work process design to help them to work towards safe, healthy and effective working procedures.

Useful References

National Rheumatoid Arthritis Society (NRAS)

NRAS provides support and information for people with Rheumatoid Arthritis and Juvenile Idiopathic Arthritis, their families, friends and carers, and health professionals with an interest in Rheumatoid Arthritis. More information available from:

National Rheumatoid Arthritis Society
Unit B4 Westacott Business Centre
Wstacott Way
Littlewick Green
Maidenhead, SL6 3RT
Tel: 01628 823524
Web: www.rheumatoid.org.uk

Fit to Work

Leaflet about reducing computer related aches and pains. Available from:

The Chartered Society of Physiotherapy, 14 Bedford Row, London WC1R 4ED
Tel: 020 7306 6666
Web: www.csp.org.uk

HSE Publications

The following leaflets have information on making adjustments in line with the Health and Safety (Display Screen Equipment) Regulations 1992.

Available from:

HSE Books, PO Box 1999, Sudbury, Suffolk CO10 6FS
Tel: 01787 881165

Health and Safety (Display Screen Equipment) Regulations 1992

	L26	ISBN 0-7176-2582-6
DSE Work. Guidance on Regulations	L26	ISBN 0-7176-0410-1
VDUs. An Easy Guide to the Regulations	HS(G)90	ISBN 0-7176-0735-6
Working with VDUs	INDG36	ISBN 0-7176-1504-9

Health & Safety Executive public enquiry service

Tel: 08701 545500
Web: www.hse.gov.uk

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