

Rheumatoid Arthritis

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 up 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.

This factsheet is part of AbilityNet's free Advice and Information service.

If you have any questions at all about anything in this Factsheet, or any other aspect of assistive technology, please contact us.

Helpline: 0800 269545

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Rheumatoid Arthritis

Rheumatoid Arthritis (RA) can occur at any age, including children. There are around 400,000 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.
- Word prediction
- 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 wireless mouse (Logitech M187) 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.



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.



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Keyguard

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.

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 lumber support to provide better posture when seated at the computer.



Pillow Mouse Pad



Dragon Naturally Speaking



Traxys Rollerball II Mouse

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.

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.

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' guides on keyboard and mouse adjustments. Just click on the Advice and Information section within our website www.abilitynet.org.uk for a full list of fact 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, AbilityNet can help you in a number of other ways too.

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
Westacott Way
Littlewick Green
Maidenhead, SL6 3RT
Tel: 01628 823524
Web: www.rheumatoid.org.uk

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