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**OUR LOVE AFFAIR WITH TECHNOLOGY  
IS LEADING TO NEW HEALTH PROBLEMS.  
HERE'S HOW TO STAY SWITCHED ON AND  
STAY SAFE. BY Elissa Doherty.**

**IPODS AND MP3 PLAYERS**

They are as ubiquitous as mobile phones among the younger generation, but iPods and MP3 players are putting people's hearing at risk.

Nearly 70 per cent of 18- to 24-year-olds and 72 per cent of 25- to 34-year-olds suffer from tinnitus, or ringing in their ears, an Australian Hearing report has found.

Worryingly, the report, *Is Australia Listening?*, found that 60 per cent of people who regularly listen to music through headphones pump the volume beyond safe levels.

"Our research has found that even though most people know that loud music causes hearing loss, more than two-thirds of Australians regularly listen to music through headphones," says Janette Thorburn, principal audiologist at Australian Hearing.

Australian Hearing recommends switching the volume to a level that still allows you to hear someone who is at arm's length without them having to shout.

The organisation also advises limiting the amount of time you are exposed to very loud noise, and taking time out from noisy concerts or clubs.

If you are concerned that loud noise has damaged your hearing, check your hearing over the phone using Telscreen toll-free on 1800 826 500.

**SITTING AT A COMPUTER**

The computer age has given birth to a raft of health problems, affecting everything from our backs and eyes to our balance.



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Office workers are the most at risk, and experts say it is important we monitor our workplace health.

**Back** Spending six to eight hours a day in front of a computer can cause us to become “hunched and immobile”, says Chiropractors Association of Australia (CAA) spokesman Dr Patrick Sim. This can cause shoulder, arm, hand and neck problems, and issues with balance and coordination. The association says good posture at the desk and a comfortable and supportive chair are paramount.

“We evolved to be upright and mobile,” Dr Sim says. “The more hunched you are after the age of 60, the more your risk of death increases because the heart and lungs are compressed, reducing oxygen and blood flow.”

Dr Sim says the answer is simple: move more. At the very least, he recommends spending three minutes a day doing Straighten Up Australia exercises ([www.straightenupaaustralia.com.au](http://www.straightenupaaustralia.com.au)).

Other tips including going for a brisk walk at lunch, a stroll around the office every hour, and checking your posture by standing with your heels and back against the wall and seeing how far back you have to move your head until it touches the wall too. See a chiropractor to have your posture and spine assessed.

**Eyes** Eye strain has become a common work-related health complaint, particularly among office workers. But ophthalmologist Dr Vicki Andersons says there are many misconceptions about sitting in front of a computer or TV screen for hours on end. Problems such as headaches usually stem from poor posture or distance from the screen, rather than the eyes being strained, she says.

“When you sit in front of a screen all day, your blink rate reduces from 20 times a minute to once or twice a minute,” Dr Andersons says. “This has a tendency to dry the eyes. But when you start blinking again it clears it up.”

Dr Andersons says there is no evidence to show that computers cause long-term vision deterioration. She says people who experience dry eyes should use lubricant-only eye drops and take regular breaks.

## **BLACKBERRY THUMB, IPOD FINGER**

Are your thumbs sore or wrists aching? If you are an excessive mobile phone or iPod user, you could have “BlackBerry thumb” or “iPod finger”

Health experts in Australia are noticing a rise in repetitive strain injury (RSI)-style injuries, particularly with the advent of the internet on pocket sized hand-held devices.

The American Society of Hand Therapists has issued a consumer alert, warning users of small electronic gadgets that heavy thumb use could lead to painful swelling of the sheath around the tendons in the thumb. The group recommends taking frequent breaks during emailing and resting your arms on a pillow for support.

Dr Sim says there is also a change in posture that occurs because of the hunched position people assume while sending a text message, which can result in neck and shoulder pain and headaches.

The CAA recommends stretches such as the Prayer stretch: push your palms and fingers together, then the backs of your hands together, and bend each thumb gently backwards towards your shoulder. These stretches target the small muscles, tendons and ligaments in the hand.



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## ***CANCER AND MOBILE PHONES***

Debate continues to rage about whether or not mobile phones cause cancer, with research providing conflicting answers.

The Cancer Council of Australia's website says that evidence suggests there is no reason for concern about harmful effects, including cancer, from mobile phone use. However, it says the lack of evidence does not prove absence of risk.

For people who are concerned, limiting your exposure to radiofrequency electromagnetic energy is recommended by limiting the length of calls and using a hands-free device to keep the phone away from your body.

"The World Health Organization's (WHO) cancer body says there is a possible

case [for a link to cancer], but it is not saying there is a case," says Professor David Roder, general manager of research innovation at the Cancer Council SA. "If there is an effect, it seems to be incredibly small."

Professor Roder says WHO is involved in a study involving 13 countries that aims to get more concrete results, particularly surrounding brain tumours and cancer of the salivary glands.

While brain tumours have not generally increased, he says one study found a slight spike in a type of tumour on the side of the head.

Professor Roder says the risk with new technologies is that early studies often do not show any harm from repeated use, but the damage may only appear later.