

Treating RSI – The ‘Hands On’ Therapies

The term Repetitive Strain Injury is an umbrella term used to describe a number of specific musculoskeletal conditions (e.g. carpal tunnel syndrome or tenosynovitis) as well as ‘diffuse RSI’, which is more difficult to define but which recent research attributes to nerve damage. These conditions are often occupational in origin. Lack of adequate diagnosis or access to appropriate treatment can exacerbate the condition and sometimes leads to job loss and economic hardship.

In the UK, GPs receive relatively little training in musculoskeletal disorders. Ideally your doctor will refer you to a specialist who has taken an interest in RSI-type conditions, usually a rheumatologist or neurologist, for a more complete diagnosis.

There are many possible treatments for RSI but initial medical help is likely to involve some kind of ‘hands on’ therapy to provide relief from symptoms.

Physiotherapy

The most likely referral for treatment will be to a physiotherapist. Some NHS physios have a lot of experience with RSI patients, but if you cannot get a referral to one who has the appropriate specialist training in, for example, muscle imbalance or neuro-dynamics, then it may be worth considering going private. The lack of resources within the NHS may also mean a long wait for your first appointment, so an initial assessment session with a private specialist physiotherapist could provide useful advice in the meantime. A good physiotherapist will be able to tell a lot about you from your posture and will want to hear about all your symptoms and examine the full range of body movement.

Depending on what the examination reveals, there are several techniques which can help. Mobilisation of adverse neural tension (ANT) is used to free up compressed or ‘tethered’ nerves. Gentle stretching helps to ease the tense muscles constricting these nerves and promotes their healing. Abnormalities in muscle groups caused by prolonged, awkward posture can be addressed using muscle balancing techniques and trigger point therapy (myotherapy) is employed to relieve muscle tension. Gentle massage of muscle and connective tissue at key locations in the body can release underlying pain.

The physiotherapist can also help to develop an individual exercise and work conditioning programme, including postural awareness, rest breaks, stretches and ergonomic information.

RSI Awareness has compiled a list of physiotherapists with experience of treating work-related musculoskeletal disorders. The Organisation of Chartered Physiotherapists in Private Practice is the recognised professional body in this field and it maintains a directory of members. Further information may also be obtained from the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy, which has a special interest group of physios with particular knowledge of RSI.

OCP
Cedar House
Bell Plantation
Watling Street
Towcester
Northants NN12 6HN
Tel (01327) 354441

Chartered Society Of Physiotherapy
14 Bedford Row
London WC1R 4ED
Tel (020) 7306 6666

www.physiofirst.org.uk

Massage

Massage is the systematic manipulation of soft tissue using a form of touch which promotes comfort and relaxation. It is therefore likely to provide some relief from the symptoms of RSI. Massage therapists use the sensitivity of their hands, clients' report of symptoms and range-of-movement exercises to detect tissue damage. It is, on the whole, a safe and non-invasive technique. Deep tissue massage works to release tension and stimulate circulation of the blood and lymph to improve the supply of oxygen and removal of waste products. Massaging the neck and shoulders can prevent further problems building up in the hand and arms and the general loosening up of muscles can help with the flexibility needed for other forms of exercise. Massage therapists can also use trigger point therapy. Stretching and strengthening of muscles are crucial in improving your condition.

The British Massage Therapy Council is an umbrella organisation for massage training and maintains a database of qualified practitioners.

British Massage Therapy Council
17 Rymers Lane
Oxon OX4 3JU
Tel (01865) 774123

www.bmtc.co.uk

Osteopathy

Osteopathy involves the manipulation of joints in order to restore them to their normal positions and mobility and to relieve tension in muscles and ligaments. Most of an osteopath's work relates to the spinal column, especially the upper back and neck in treating RSI, through which control of the blood and nerve supply to the limbs passes. Treatment will usually involve a combination of massage, mobilization techniques and perhaps spinal manipulation or gentle releasing techniques. Chronic cases are less likely to respond however and care should be taken to find a suitably experienced practitioner. Osteopathy is no longer considered an 'unorthodox' treatment and most osteopaths work comfortably alongside conventional doctors and medical specialists.

Osteopathy Information Service
General Osteopathic Council
Osteopathy House
176 Tower Bridge Road
London SE1 3LU
Tel (020) 7357 6655

www.osteopathy.org.uk

Other alternative therapies

The above therapies are closely aligned with mainstream medicine and your regular doctor would normally be happy to work alongside a suitably qualified practitioner. There are also several other alternative therapies which are nevertheless widely accessible and can help to treat the symptoms of RSI. They are holistic in their approach and it is advisable to find someone you like and trust. The rapport you have with your therapist is probably as important as the therapy itself and again it is sensible to check that s/he is a registered practitioner. Try to get feedback and recommendations from friends and colleagues or contact the organisations below. As a general rule, if there is no noticeable improvement after four sessions, it is probably worth trying something else.

Acupuncture

British Acupuncture Council
Park House
206 Latimer Road
London W10 6RE
Tel (020) 8735 0400

www.acupuncture.org.uk

Bowen Technique

B.T.E.R Admin Office
Po Box 594
Taunton
Somerset TA1 3BF

www.bowentherapists.com

Craniosacral Therapy

The Craniosacral Therapy Association
27 Old Gloucester Street
London WC1N 3XX
Tel 07000 784735

www.craniosacral.co.uk

Reflexology

The Association of Reflexologists
27 Old Gloucester Street
London WC1N 3XX
Tel 0870 567 3320

www.aor.org.uk

Shiatsu

The Shiatsu Society
Barber House
Storeys Bar Road
Fengate
Peterborough PE1 5YS
Tel (01788) 555051

www.shiatsu.org