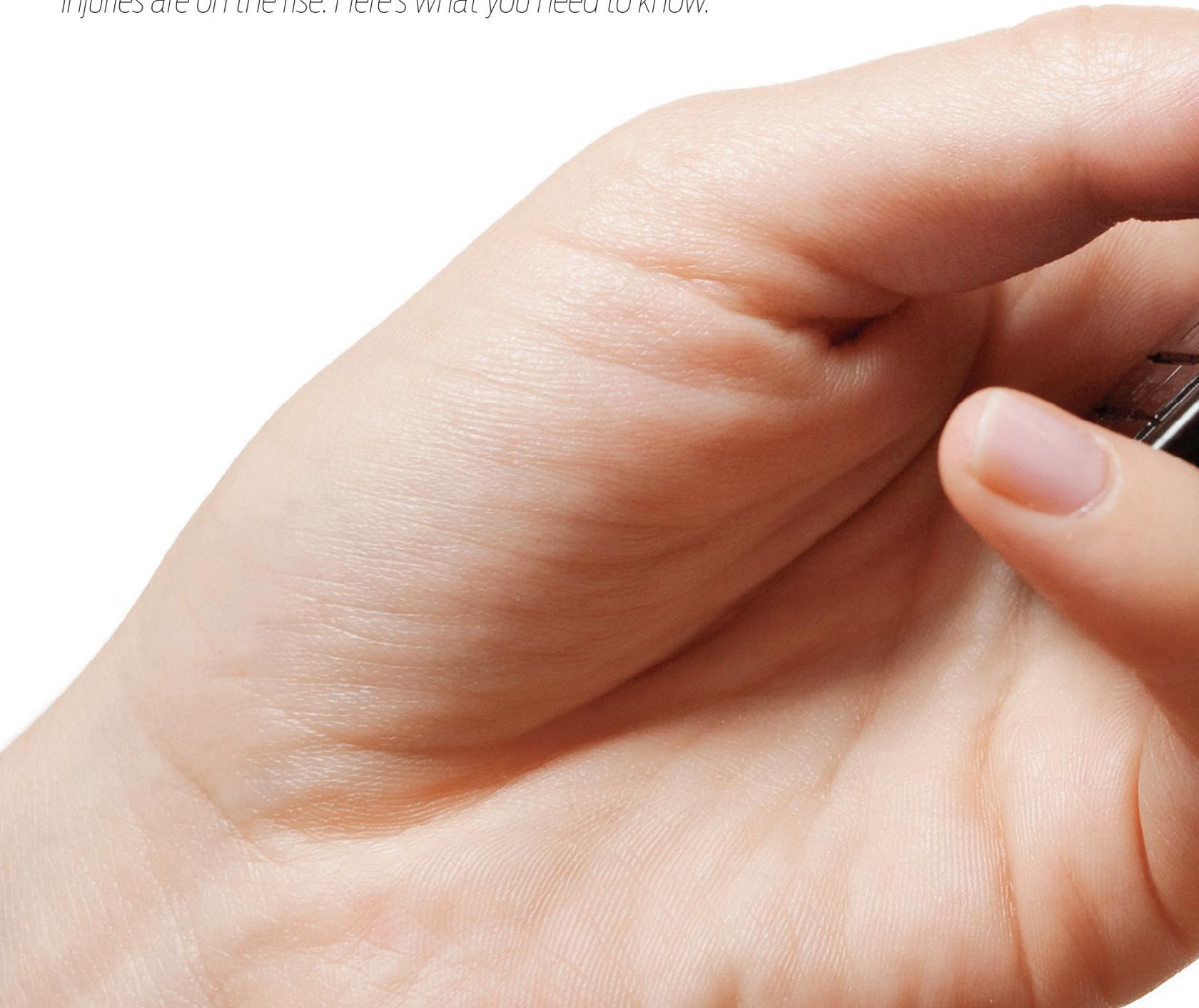


DIGITAL DEXTERITY

KEEP YOUR HANDS HEALTHY

*Because we're all glued to our **PDA**s and **keyboards**, repetitive stress injuries are on the rise. Here's what you need to know.*

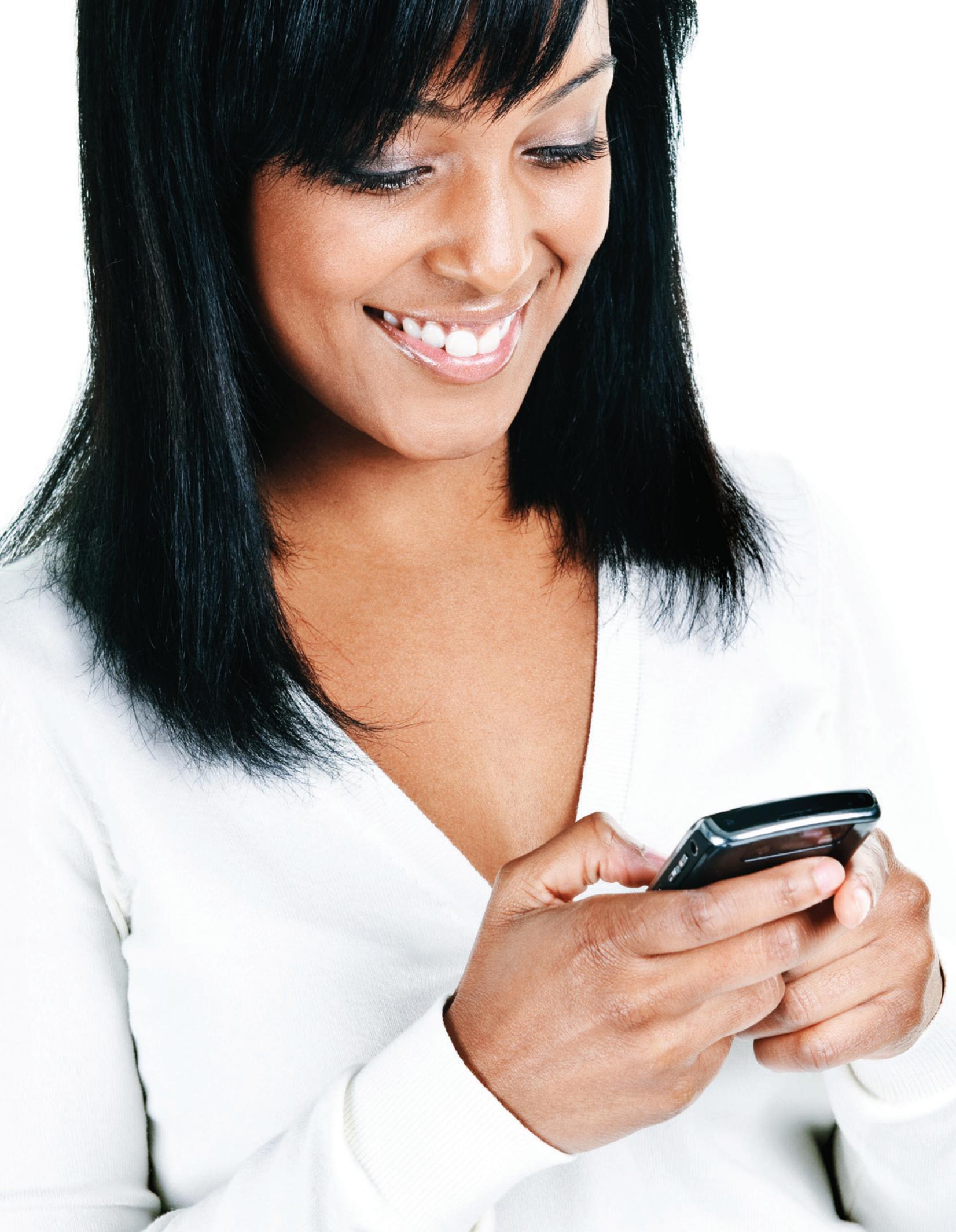




By Janet Carlson

Emma C. is a typical college student in many ways, one of them being that she is in a long-term, full-time relationship with...her iPhone.

It's with her wherever she goes and seems permanently attached to her fingertips. Like so many of us, Emma multitasks—holding a conversation in the room and in the ether simultaneously—walking, talking, and looking up the nearest pizza place. She uses the device for all manner of tasks, entertainment, and communication. Her hands, particularly her thumbs, seem to rest only when she sleeps. But she's young and agile, so you'd assume this devoted texter can take it, right?





“I’ve had pain in my wrist and right thumb,”

Emma reports. “If I type or text too long, I get wrist pain and cramping now. The iPhone, though, is a world better than the old flip-phone I used to use. I guess its keyboard was a lot more cramped and you really had to push the buttons down hard. My mom had carpal tunnel surgery already; I’m pretty sure I’m on my way there!”

If you’re like most people in the connected world today, it may be time to give your hands a break. Margot Miller, president of the American Physical Therapy Association’s Occupational Health Special Interest Group, says excessive “thumbing” – the verb has entered the popular parlance along with PDAs – can lead to strain, especially because she says the thumb is the least dexterous digit and the keys are small. Some physicians disagree about the thumb’s dexterity. One leading hand surgeon says it’s actually quite dexterous and is suited to exactly the kinds of movements required by a PDA, though perhaps not to the constant use. He says he hasn’t seen an influx of patients with wrist or thumb injuries in recent years, so it’s unlikely there’s an epidemic of repetitive stress injuries (RSI) related to thumbing.

RSI is the umbrella term that refers to a variety of conditions, including carpal tunnel syndrome, which affect the nerve on the underside of the wrist. A sports injury

practitioner in New York says RSI “occurs when the repetitive insult to muscle, tendon, ligament, or bone occurs at a greater rate than the time it takes to heal. As a result, tissues can become inflamed, and in some cases, degenerative.” Emma’s issue could be De Quervain’s tenosynovitis, an inflammation involving the tendons on the side of the wrist that help control the thumb.

The best prevention or treatment for symptoms is rest – even for young people who may think they’re invulnerable. Here, more tips from the experts to help you stay connected sensibly.



What you should do to prevent RSI or ease the symptoms

- » First, what not to do: Don't ignore RSI. "Poorly healed tissue can lead to limited range of motion and increased chance for reinjury," the sports injury therapist says.
- » Limit your typing on hand-helds to "haiku" – the briefest possible messages. Save the epistles for your keyboard.
- » Don't think at your device; holding it in the ready position for long periods of time puts stress on the tendons and ligaments of fingers and even elbows. When you pause to think, drop your hands to your sides, or even better, put the device down.
- » Consider getting voice recognition software to decrease the burden on your hands.
- » Even if you have no symptoms, take frequent, short breaks during computer work or hand-held use. Drop your hands to your sides and shake them gently, wiggling your fingers. Lift your arms overhead and wiggle your fingers. Use one hand to press back the fingers of the other hand and then do the same thing forward. Stretch all your fingers wide and then make a gentle fist. Interlace your fingers, turn them out, and straighten your arms above your head, pressing your fingers toward the ceiling. Do the same out in front of you.
- » Do daily stretches for fingers, hands, wrists, elbows, arms, and even shoulders – everything's connected. Whole body exercises like such as swimming are terrific for healing RSI.
- » Buy a squishy exercise ball (or several) for the hands. Use one during your regular breaks at the keyboard. Keep one in the car or by the TV, and use it often.
- » If you have pain in your wrists, fingers, or the soft tissue between the fingers, change how you type and how you hold your iPhone, iPad, or Blackberry. Look at where you hold your index finger. Is it hyperextended? Notice the tension in your thumbs. Experiment with new ways to hold your devices and to type.
- » Use ice frequently, especially during heavy typing days.
- » For mild pain and/or tingling, especially upon rising, try a nighttime splinting brace, available at drugstores.
- » All of the above applies to laptop and desktop users as well. Pain in your mouse hand? The sports injury experts suggest switching your mouse to the other side of your keyboard. "It's awkward at first, but highly effective."
- » If pain worsens or persists for more than two or three weeks, see your primary care doctor. ■

