

## **“REPETITIVE STRAIN INJURY (RSI) AKA WORK RELATED UPPER LIMB DISORDER AKA NON-SPECIFIC ARM PAIN”**

Nearly everyone has heard of Repetitive Strain Injury (RSI). It has been recognised for many years as a diagnosis given to someone suffering with arm pain related to repetitive tasks at work or with sport. Traditionally it was seen in factory workers particularly in the meat packing industry. However with the technological revolution leading to increased computer use, this is something now commonly associated with office workers. At Pure Sports Medicine, the Physiotherapy team see many patients with this condition.

### **Why so many names for the same problem?**

The name of the condition has changed over recent years as the medical profession attempts to learn more about the condition and change the perception of the problem. Essentially the name is an umbrella term that describes a collection of symptoms. RSI is also known as Work Related Upper Limb Disorder (WRULD) or Non-Specific Arm Pain. The reason for the change to the name is to move away from the problem just being associated with repetitive tasks, it isn't always. Also RSI became associated with compensation claims against employers and legal disputes about blame.

Medical professionals may use any of the above names, it really depends on who you see. The reason for the name being quite vague as in Non-Specific Arm Pain is because each individual can present with quite different complaints, with symptoms in different areas, there is no 'text-book' presentation.

### **What are the symptoms?**

The symptoms of RSI will differ for each individual. Essentially the common factors are pain in the arm or both arms. There may also be neck or upper back pain. Pins and needles or numbness may also be present, this can be anywhere in the arm(s) or hands. There may also be a complaint of coldness or change in circulation to the hand/fingers.

The Physiotherapist or Sports Physician that you see at Pure Sports Medicine would want to rule out any other problems that may be causing the symptoms. Before we diagnose RSI we would want to make sure that the pain is not due to a compressed nerve in the neck, a joint strain or bulging disc causing the arm symptoms. There are tests that we do in the clinic to rule these problems out.

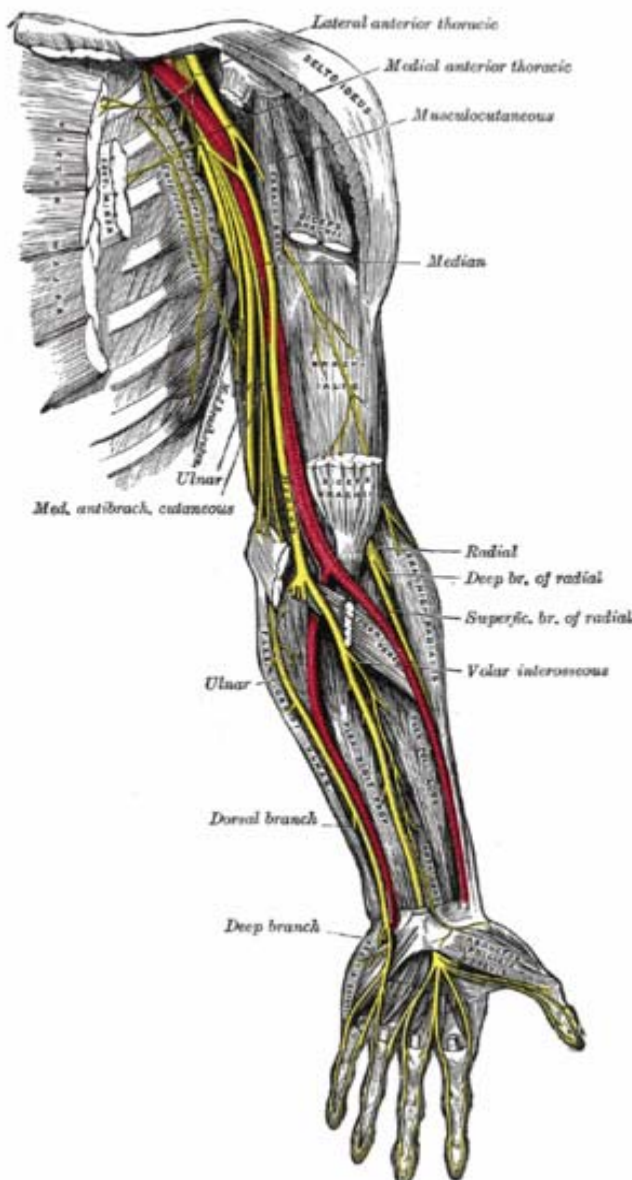
### **Why do these problems develop?**

This is the difficult part to understand. Research over recent years within Physiotherapy and medical circles has made great progress in understanding the causes of the symptoms of RSI and has changed the way the patients are treated and managed long-term.

Historically the pains were thought to be due to the repetitive movements at the wrists and fingers causing muscle tightness and fatigue. This would be treated with stretching and soft tissue

massage. However what we now understand is that the pains are likely to be due to strain on the nerve tissues within the arm. For this to make sense we need to consider some anatomy.

The Nerves of the Arm (yellow in the diagram)



Nerves are like lengths of string, originating from the neck and going all the way down the arm to the hand and fingers. They are thin hollow tubes with fluid moving up and down them giving us a chemical messaging system that allows us to have skin sensation, muscle power and controlled circulation amongst other things. These nerves are sensitive – think about how it feels to bang your ‘funny bone’, this is the reaction of the ulna nerve being hit! Along the pathway down the arm the nerves pass through tight spaces around and through many muscles and joints.

If we now consider the sitting posture of working at a computer....imagine you are slouching a bit because you’re tired. The nerves are under strain already, the fact that you are then typing away on the keyboard for some time just makes them strain even more as the muscles around the nerves work hard – tensing up and contracting. So the sensitive nerve tissue is under strain from posture, particularly if you’re slouching and from the activity of you’re muscle system.

Over time this is thought to cause the nerve tissue to become overly sensitive and may also cause numbness, pins and needles and perceived changes to your circulation.

## **What can Pure Sports Medicine do to help?**

Most people who suffer with RSI, WRULD or NSAP are referred to a Physiotherapist by their GP or Specialist. If you haven't been then you should request it. Physiotherapists at Pure Sports Medicine are experts in assessment of the musculoskeletal system.

We will initially explore the history of your problem, including your working habits and sports interests. We will then assess your problem with a physical examination which will include tests to rule out any other possible diagnoses. All the tests are comfortable and can be done in the clinic. Included in this would be an assessment of your posture, spinal movement and upper body muscle system.

Essentially our job is to give you an accurate diagnosis and explain the causes of your individual problem. We would then discuss what Physiotherapy can do to help you and set some targets for how quickly we expect things to improve/change.

'Hands on' treatment is carried out to help improve mobility of your soft tissues, nerves and joints and will usually include massage, myofascial release, joint mobilisation and sometimes manipulation. There will be a strong emphasis on constructing an exercise rehabilitation plan for the long-term, this will include exercises to be done at work during the day and at home or the gym depending on what suits your lifestyle best.

Important consideration must also be given to your working environment. If you work at a desk then the position of your chair, computer, mouse and workspace is essential to ensure good working posture. But this also applies to situations where you are not sitting. This is called Ergonomics – how does the environment in which you work suit the job you are trying to do.

## **Will I get better?**

With appropriate management and rehabilitation you should get better but it usually takes a number of months. There may need to be a period of adjustment, when you work less hours at a computer or other repetitive tasks in order to prevent exacerbation of the problem. You will certainly need to become diligent with exercises and posture.

The physiotherapist will implement an exercise regime for you to do at work. It is possible to get software packages that shut down your PC at a given time interval in order for you to do the necessary exercises. This helps with remembering them at the right time.

## **What should I do if I have symptoms?**

If you are suffering with any of the symptoms described above then you should see a professional for some advice. This could be your GP or Occupational Health Department at work if that is available. Alternatively you could see a Physiotherapist without a referral for an assessment. If you are undergoing treatment but have not been referred for Physiotherapy it may be worth you discussing this with the person managing your case.

### **Clinics at:**

Point West, 116 Cromwell Road  
Kensington, London.

The Lodge, Parkside Hospital  
53 Parkside, Wimbledon, London.



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If you have any specific questions about RSI, WRULD or NSAP please contact us on **0870 2000 878** or [reception@puresportsmed.com](mailto:reception@puresportsmed.com)

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