

Keyboard not necessarily the culprit in computer-related pain

Calgary Herald

CALGARY — Amid a growing number of computer-related injury claims and lawsuits, Microsoft Corp. has joined the list of manufacturers in offering ergonomically designed computer keyboards.

The Microsoft keyboard, which retails for about \$129 Cdn, is supposed to cut down on computer-related hand, arm and wrist injuries, known as repetitive strain injuries or RSI.

But ergonomists say the computer keyboard may not be the culprit.

"It's been my experience that your boss, workplace, or chair may have more to do with RSI than your keyboard," says Dr. Brendan

Adams, who spent two years studying RSI as part of his accreditation with the Canadian Board of Occupational Medicine.

"There's certainly room for improvement on the design, but I would put money into a really good chair before I put it into a new keyboard."

Adams says tension in the shoulders and neck can cause pain in the wrist. If stress in the workplace is causing you to strain your neck or tighten your shoulders for a prolonged period of time, the action will translate to the tendons in the arm and into the wrist.

Poor posture or a chair that doesn't offer enough spinal support can also translate into arm, wrist and hand pain through the network of nerves in the spinal cord.

"If somebody is sitting in a lousy position in a bad workplace and crochets as a hobby, they're going to get RSI no matter what keyboard they use," Adams says.

Northern Telecom Canada Ltd. ergonomist Shona Anderson agrees the keyboard is less likely to blame than other workplace factors.

"In my opinion, a lot of the problems people are feeling are related to the whole workplace setup. I like to study the way a person uses their computer and understand the conditions they're working under before I would consider something like the keyboard."

Anderson says the position of a mouse is also a major cause of RSI. The mouse should be kept close to the keyboard so the user doesn't have to over-extend his or her arm.

Apple Computer Inc. introduced a keyboard last year that rotates outward into a V pattern, and a variety of other versions are available from such manufacturers as MyKey and Kinesis.

The Microsoft keyboard is split in the middle and rotates outward similar to the Apple keyboard design. The V-pattern encourages straighter wrist position.

It also includes a built-in palm rest, a wrist levelling bar, and has 104 keys — three more than a standard keyboard — to streamline use of the Microsoft Windows operating system. The Microsoft keyboard requires Windows 3.1 or a later version and two megabytes of RAM.