

The Wellbeing Guide to Videogaming

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If you were resigned to the fact that being a keen gamer meant hours in front of a console leaving you fat and full of aches and pains, think again. Read on to find out how to keep your waistline small(ish), your performance sharp and gaming-related injuries to a minimum.

It's your chosen way to spend an afternoon at home, but you've probably already discovered that gaming has its downsides as far as your wellbeing's concerned. It's not surprising when you consider you're sitting or lying in fairly unnatural positions with your head held at all sorts of strange angles and to top it all off, you're then engaging in highly repetitive hand micro-movements.

Add to that the fact that you're probably playing after a hard day's work or studying, when your body's already tired - your muscles, nerves and tendons are probably fatigued already, so it's not surprising you find yourself complaining of neck ache. But it's not all doom and gloom - enjoy hours of pain-free, high-energy gaming with our ultimate Wellbeing Guide to Gaming

Before you start...

Become a savvy gamer – set yourself up in a good position to start with. You are, after all, only human and trying to get good about your posture once you're in the throes of the game is simply too much to ask of yourself.

- Sitting in a chair or, even better, on one of those large exercise balls is far, far better for your body than lying curled up on the floor or kneeling hunched-over in front of the TV.
- Try and make ensure that the screen is at eye-level and is straight in front of you – having to twist or over-extend from the shoulders even for short periods of time can play havoc with your upper back.
- Make sure your back has plenty of support; use pillows to cushion the lower back if needs be and do the same by tucking pillows underneath your elbows.

Warming up for gaming

The most important part of a gaming warm-up should be your stretching – this should make gaming easier and will help to keep your hand movements balanced.

Start with some mobility work to increase blood flow to the area and mobilise the hand and wrist joints. Start by shaking your hands gently up and down and then switch to making circular movements with your wrists (this is a very good remedy for treating and preventing nasty complaints such as Carpal Tunnel Syndrome, a type of Repetitive Strain Injury where you get pins and needles in your hands and fingers). It's also good to mix this movement up with opening and closing your hands a few times.

After you've done these mobility exercises, try massaging your hands to boost circulation in the areas you're going to be working with - this will also help to mobilise the joints. Make sure you work on your entire hand gently rubbing palm, fingers and backs of hands. Then, move onto the following stretches...

Wrist stretch

- Sit on the edge of your chair and place your elbows on a desk in front of you shoulder width apart.
- Bring the palms of your hands together so your hands are in a praying position and slowly lift your elbows off the desk and out to either side until you feel a stretch in the bottom of your wrists and forearms.
- Hold for 30 seconds.
- Repeat on the other wrist.

Wrist and forearms stretches

- Extend your right arm straight out in front of you with the fingers facing downward.
- With your left hand, place a little pressure on top of your right hand and gently pull it towards you.
- Hold for 30 seconds.
- Return to your starting position.
- Then, switch so that you're pointing the fingers of your right hand upward and apply a little pressure behind the fingers on your right hand and gently pull them towards you.
- Hold for 30 seconds.
- Repeat on the other side.

Thumb stretch

- Outstretch your right hand in front of you, fingers facing forward and thumb upward - keep your wrist straight.
- With your left hand, gently pull your thumb towards you.
- Hold for 30 seconds; you should feel the stretch in your right hand at the base of the thumb.
- Repeat on the left side.

Finger stretch

- With your right hand out in front of you, extend your fingers until you feel a stretch.
- Hold for a count of 15.
- Then make a fist with your fingers and hold for a further 15 seconds.
- Repeat this 2-3 times.
- Repeat on your left hand.

Mid-game

A quick breather mid-game might mean the difference between failure and success – don't let your opponent get the better of you when it all could have been so different if you'd just taken five minutes out...

- Obey the 20-20-20 rule. Every twenty minutes, stop and focus on an object that's twenty feet away for twenty seconds – this will help to prevent or alleviate eye strain.
- Stop every twenty minutes to exercise! Run up and down the stairs to get your heart going – improved oxygen flow means better brain power.
- Repeat the hand massaging exercise from your warm-up.
- Stretch your upper back, neck and shoulders out: extend your arms out in front of you with your hands clasped together, then extend your arms over your head, reach a little way behind your head and then extend them out in front again, back to your starting position. Next, shrug your shoulders, then slowly drop the head sideways to each shoulder.
- Repeat your finger and thumb stretches from warm-up.
- Before you resume, check your position: is the screen still directly in front of you and do you still have plenty of back and elbow support?
- Do a chin-tuck while you're playing. Chin tucks are your best defence against upper back and neck pain and you can do them any time, anywhere. Standing or sitting, gently push your chin forward and exaggerate bad posture, then tuck your chin and hold the tucked position for 3-10 seconds.

Preventing Injuries

There's no reason why you can't be a keen gamer minus the aches and pains - but you need to focus on prevention rather than cure.

- Keep your wrists as straight as you can – try not to let them point downwards for long periods at a time when you're holding the controller.
- Try and avoid clenching your teeth or letting your shoulders rise to your neck during a game.
- Stretch and move regularly as you did during the warm up to avoid your joints locking up and your muscles getting tired and stiff.
- Never ignore warning signs such as headaches, muscle pain or cramping or any numbness and tingling. Listen to your body and down tools.
- Stretch your lower body muscles. Your hamstrings (backs of thighs) and hip flexors (very top of front of thigh) can become tight when you've been sitting a while. They can pull on the pelvis which can lead to lower back pain.

Hamstrings stretch

Stand with one leg in front of the other, then bend your back knee and rest your weight on that back leg. Tilt your hips forward and push your bottom back. Hold for 20-30 seconds.

Hip flexor stretch

Kneel on the floor (preferable on a mat or towel) and lunge forward with one of your legs. Position your front leg so your knee is at a 90-degree angle. Your back leg should extend straight back from your hips. Place your hands on your front knee and then slowly lower forward to the ground by pushing your hips forward. Hold for a slow count of 10 before switching sides.

- Set yourself limits. After three hours, no matter how conscientious you've been your body and brain could probably do with a rest.

Performance Boosting

Practise makes perfect, no doubt, but there are other strategies you can employ to make sure you're always on top of your game.

- **Make sure you get your zzzzs.** You'll perform better if you've had your eight hours sleep. Don't let your opponents get the better of you just because you've been burning the candle at both ends. Grogginess, impaired cognitive function and an ability to make decisions are just some of the side effects of not enough sleep; not what you want when you need to be on top of your game. Literally.
- **Invest in a squeazy toy.** Increased dexterity can help with playing speed. Gadgets such as stress balls can help with grip strength, dexterity, mobility and motor skills.
- **Listen to the beat.** Research has shown that there's no better way than listening to music with a steady beat to get your adrenaline going, which will help to improve reaction time. Watch the volume though – you don't want a whole new health problem in the form of tinnitus.
- **Get breathless and sweaty.** It's proven that physically fit people have faster reaction times. If you want to boost your mental and physical performance, try taking some light aerobic exercise (20 minutes should do it) before you play. This could be cycling, a light jog or a brisk walk.
- **Keep the beer to a minimum.** Alcohol impairs everything from playing speed to good judgement so it's a definite no-no for gaming.
- **Work on your dexterity.** Try doing this exercise regularly between playing: lie your hand on a flat surface and then lift up your fingers one at a time. Try gradually speeding up and then repeat but this time, with every other finger, back and forth. Find a rhythm and then aim to speed up increasing the amount of time you do this for.

Troubleshooting - FAQs

Find the solution to everything from aching thumbs, to flagging energy levels here.

Q. I get sleepy when I've been playing a while. What's the best thing to perk me up?

A. Take a breather and get some fresh air. Fresh air improves circulation – even being indoors for long periods at a time can zap you of vitality and energy; not what the gamer needs.

Q. I suffer with thumb pain after I've only been playing a short while. What can I do to get rid of this?

A. It sounds as though you're suffering from tendinitis of the thumb, a kind of Repetitive Stress Injury. Give your hand a rest, even if just for a day or two, and apply some ice to the affected area. Make sure you always warm up (see above) before you play - try the wrist and thumb stretches in the Warm Up section too.

Q. I'm gaining weight from gaming a lot over the winter. Help!

Weight gain is a common side effect from lots of gaming. Probably the main reason is that you're eating more than you're burning up – gaming tires your brain but you're burning minimal calories while you're playing. Make sure that you balance your gaming time with more active pursuits – you can keep these high-octane to keep you sharpened for your game (think squash, mountain biking, bungee jumping...and so on) or you can opt for the more mundane - swimming, cycling, running, skipping, weight training. All will have the same effect as far as your waistline's concerned. Be conscious of what you snack on as you're playing too – if you're prone to guzzling beer and chowing down pizza as you play, you need to put a stop to this. Think about switching to healthier alternatives such as diet drinks and pretzels.

Q. What can I do for my aching wrist as I play more with my right hand?

A. Try switching your main hand to your left hand. Yes, probably easier said than done but worth trying if it spreads the loads between two hands. Ease off on your grip too – this will take some practise to start with but it will become second nature before you know it. Finally, shake your hands regularly flexing your fingers as you did in the warm-up.

Q. I get neck pain when I've been playing a while; it comes on quite early.

A. Try stretching out your upper trapezius muscle. This is the muscle right at the top of your back and neck and if your shoulders wind up round your ears when you're engrossed in a game, it can get tight and cause neck pain. Do this stretch daily until you see an improvement: take your right arm behind your back and at the same time, gently apply pressure to the right side of your head using your left hand – tilt your head towards the left as you do this. You should feel a bit of a pull (*nothing* painful) on the right side, from the side of your neck down to your shoulder. Hold for this stretch for around 20 seconds. Relax and repeat then switch to the other side.

The 'Street Fighter' Menu

So your niggling neck pain is a thing of the past; you've worked on ways to improve your game, now it's time to tackle your diet...

The best gaming diet is one which keeps you mentally alert and satisfies any snacking urges without causing you to gain any weight. Try these easy-to-cook, easy-to-eat menus to keep you on fighting form.

Menu I:

Breakfast: Scrambled eggs on toast

Lunch: Stuffed pitta with tuna, sweetcorn, chopped peppers and tomatoes and a teaspoon of low fat mayonnaise.

Dinner: Steak and jacket potato

Snack: Half a bagel with cream cheese or peanut butter

What eating this will do for your game:

- A breakfast such as scrambled eggs on toast is high in protein which will keep you feeling fuller for longer and ward off drowsiness.
- A stuffed pitta bread at lunch means you're getting more stuffing that will help to keep you alert (peppers and sweetcorn are good sources of antioxidants, while tuna is one of the best protein sources; both will help to keep you feeling perky) and less of sleep-inducing bread.
- Lean steak is very high in protein which will help to keep those overworked muscles in good form.
- Jacket potatoes are high in fibre making them both nutritious and filling, which means that you're less likely to snack post-dinner.
- Snacking on a bagel which includes some protein will help to tide you over mid-meal so you're not craving other, less healthy snacks.

Menu II

Breakfast: Crunchy cereal containing some seeds and/or nuts

Lunch: Roast beef sandwich on rye bread with horseradish

Dinner: Moroccan chicken cous cous (cut skinless chicken breasts into strips and fry with an onion and some garlic using just a drizzle of olive oil. Add sliced courgettes, tomatoes, cumin and coriander. Cook for ten minutes before adding chickpeas and sugar snap peas. Serve on a bed of cous cous).

Snack: Chocolate bar that contains fruit and/or nuts

What eating this will do for your game:

- Seeds or nuts in your cereal means you're getting your daily quota of Essential Fatty Acids (EFAs), which help with many things – brain functioning being the most relevant.
- Roast beef is a great protein source as well as containing good amounts of minerals such as iron and zinc which are essential for keeping you energised. Rye bread is a good source of fibre, so its glycemic response is less than normal bread meaning you're less likely to suffer from a post-lunch slump.

- Chocolate contains small amounts of caffeine so, depending on your caffeine tolerance, this should be enough to perk you up. Including fibre and protein in the form of nuts will slow down the sugar spike you'll get from the chocolate. Don't overdo it – a 40g bar is *plenty*.
- Cous cous is a slow release carbohydrate, so if you're after a filling, healthy carb that will keep you awake for an after-dinner game, cous cous is it.

DIET TIPS FOR GAMING

Contrary to what you thought, you don't have to forgo all your vices to stay healthy – it's all about moderation and timing.

- **Use caffeine wisely**
There's nothing wrong with a morning cup of coffee; in fact, it's positively good for you. And if you're struggling with your game mid-afternoon, as long as you don't overdo it, an energy drink might be just the thing to perk you back up. Caffeine has its health benefits - research has shown that it can help to prevent Parkinson's disease and can benefit asthma sufferers.
- **Have an afternoon power snack.**
A small snack that contains protein and/or fibre a few hours after lunch can perk you up mid-afternoon.
- **Keep drinking!**
Make sure you rehydrate regularly. This can be easy to forget when you're gaming; you're more likely to sip beer or cola but dehydration often takes the form of fatigue – not what you want when you need to be razor sharp.
- **Enjoy the odd sugar fix**
A little sugar every now and then does most people no harm at all. If you've been staring at a screen for a few hours and you need something instant to perk you up and tide you over, opt for jelly beans, a two-fingered Kit Kat, a small packet of Maltesers... Just make sure you don't break the calorie bank.
- **Go easy on the fry-ups**
Fried and fatty foods can leave you sluggish and lethargic so meals like cooked breakfasts aren't really the gamer's friend. Keep your meat lean and don't go for big meals if you want to stay out of a post-meal slump.
- **Quit mindless snacking.**
Don't let your love of gaming result in you becoming an obesity statistic! Watch how much you're eating – be really tough with yourself and establish snacking rules and if you have a food weakness - be it doughnuts, pork pies, crisps or ice cream - keep it out of the house and out of temptation's way.
- **Know your takeaways.**
Admittedly you're not going to want to pause your game and cook up a healthy three course meal but beware of the takeaway - most takeaways have the potential to push your belt up a notch in very little time and leave you feeling lethargic too. If you're having pizza, opt for a thin base with a light meat topping such as chicken; skip the naan on the Indian and fill up instead of sides such as dahl and if you're having Chinese, give the sweet and sour balls a miss and opt for a stir fry and rice instead.