

# PLAYING (LESS) HURT: CAUSES OF OVERUSE INJURIES

by Janet Horvath

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An injury usually results from combined factors. There are some over which our control is minimal to nil, and others that we may have considerable power to affect.

## Misuse

This is the area musicians typically fear most. We are loath to admit we might have faulty technique or that we learned “wrong” or that bad habits have crept into our playing. But just as the outstanding athletes of our day sustain injury on occasion, even if they are doing everything “right,” we can face injury despite our talent. The best defense is awareness.

## Changes Affecting Technique

Be vigilant concerning any abrupt change in technique. Are you trying a new bow or instrument that is bigger, heavier, or balanced differently from what you’re accustomed to? Are the strings too high off the fingerboard? Is the instrument set up in such a way that it is “resistant”? Is your chin rest too high or shoulder rest too low? Are the keys much harder to press down? It is essential to look objectively at your instrument.

An excellent young cellist I know was preparing a recital as well as performing a Strauss work at her orchestra job. The conductor was demanding. He wanted more sound. So she pulled out a bow that was probably three to five grams heavier than her usual bow. She was also putting in much more playing time than she would normally do. Within a couple of days her finger blew up to the size of a sausage. She couldn’t bend it, let alone hold a bow! She went to a doctor, who said, “Take some aspirin and call me in a week.”

What good was that? She had a solo recital to play! I was convinced that it was the bow. She took a few days off and switched back to her other bow. The swelling reduced and her finger returned to normal. Even a few grams can make a huge physical impact.

## Sudden Increases in Playing Time and/or Intensity

Are you attending a summer festival or music camp or preparing for a competi-

tion where you have a sudden increase in the amount and intensity of practice? Do you think you must play every day or you’ll lose your edge? Quite the contrary. You are probably overusing your muscles by never giving them a break. Or you might suffer from the opposite problem. Are you a busy parent who juggles practicing with family duties between orchestra services, showing up to play without adequate preparation or warmup? In this case you tax your muscles with difficult repertoire without really being in shape for it. Have you ever taken a month or more off from playing and returned to a double rehearsal of a Mahler symphony?

If your answer to many of the questions is yes, you may be putting yourself at risk for an injury. Overuse injuries can creep up on you.

A playing diary can be a helpful tool. Immediately after practice sessions, rehearsals and performances, note in your diary (or date book) whether you warmed up before playing and whether, after playing, anything aches, tingles or feels stiff. Note also whether any passages were more difficult than usual.

Keep notes for at least a couple of weeks

and watch for any patterns that might emerge. Unless we keep notes, it’s easy to lose track of when something started hurting or what music we were playing that seemed to trigger our problem.

Remember that not all pain means injury. Prolonged, persisting or chronic pain means that something is wrong.

Pain is an obvious sign of impending injury. But there are more subtle indicators. In its initial stages, an injury may manifest itself as tightness, cramping, stiffness or fatigue. These symptoms and patterns can be difficult to pinpoint; they may occur during or after playing and may wax and wane in a seemingly arbitrary way.

Sometimes it doesn’t hurt when you play. Sometimes it does. It may hurt as you begin to play, then as your muscles warm and stretch it may stop, only to return with a vengeance after you’re done playing.

Other indications of injury may include hot, numb or tingly sensations or a reduced sense of touch. Take note of weakness or impaired dexterity, or a failure in your muscle to maintain control. You may be on your way to an injury if, for example, something you could easily do a couple



This newly published book is essential for all musicians. String, keyboard, percussion, harp, brass, and wind players will play and feel better.

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of weeks ago now feels sluggish, and your fingers just won't do what you want them to. This type of fatigue may be an indicator and possibly even a predisposing factor to pain and injury.

Muscles that are overused have reduced endurance capacity. As they become more fatigued they become more tense. The increased tension reduces blood flow. A vicious cycle ensues. More and more fatigue occurs in a muscle when there is not enough blood flow due to tightness or tensing in the muscle. Minute tears can occur as a result.

It is rare to see an acute or sudden injury in a musician, but if a musician has a determination to master a trill passage or double-stop passages, for example, and he or she spends hours on it one day, an acute injury may occur.

Chronic injuries seem to be more prevalent and they are also more insidious. These overuse injuries are cumulative and may occur as a result of weeks, months or even years of overuse. Be especially mindful of clumsiness at and away from your instrument. Are you suddenly a klutz, frequently dropping things? Are you finding normal

activities like doing up buttons, chopping food, brushing teeth or using tools inexplicably tiring? Do you wake up stiff and sore each day? When you are playing does a finger or do fingers retract or splay involuntarily, or do lips involuntarily wiggle? Are your extremities subject to becoming inexplicably cold? These all may indicate underlying problems.

#### 10 Danger Signals

1. Pain and/or burning sensation
2. Fatigue or heaviness
3. Weakness
4. Impaired dexterity
5. Tingling, numbness
6. Clumsiness
7. Stiffness
8. Involuntary movement
9. Impaired circulation
10. Difficulty with normal daily activities

The most important thing is: **if you feel pain stop, ice the area and take a day or two off.**

Most aches will resolve themselves, but if they don't, see a qualified arts medicine

specialist (my book has several pages of resources) or a rehabilitation specialist for a diagnosis. Don't self-diagnose! Many injuries have similar symptoms and may refer pain to areas other than the injury site.

The sooner you nip a problem in the bud, the quicker you will recover fully and there is less of a likelihood that a long-term problem will ensue.

*Janet Horvath, associate principal cello of the Minnesota Orchestra for over two decades, is a soloist, chamber musician, writer and advocate for injury prevention. A trailblazer in speaking and writing openly about the physical stresses experienced by musicians, she has contributed importantly to improvements in working conditions and in awareness for musicians' work-related ailments and their prevention. She has conducted seminars called "Playing (less) Hurt" all over the nation. The Injury Prevention Guide for Musicians is the culmination of 20 years of lecturing and teaching in the field of Performing Arts Medicine. †*