Advice for Laptop Users

The Problems

Laptops are not very ergonomic – it's not usually possible to use them in a good posture and they can cause you problems.

You need to try to prevent:
- Neck and eye problems from trying to see the screen at an awkward angle
- Wrist and hand problems from bending your wrists to use the keyboard, or from over-using the other input devices (mouse, nipple, rollerball, pad etc)
- Shoulder or back problems from carrying the laptop, or from reaching too far to use it, or from using it extensively in an unusual posture such as slouching, bending over or lying down.

Selecting a laptop

The first rule is – where possible don't use a laptop for long periods, use a desktop computer. You can arrange the desktop equipment much better so you can work with fewer postural problems, and you can see and adjust the screen much more clearly.

If you do need to buy a laptop, look out for:
- As low a weight as possible (3kg or less) for computer and accessories.
- As large and clear a screen as possible (14" diagonal or more)
- As large size keys as possible
- As long a battery life as possible, or extra transformer /cable sets so you can only carry the computer, not the cables etc.
- Touch pad, rollerball or external mouse rather than 'nipple' trackpoint device
- Facility for attaching external mouse and numeric keyboard
- Friction pads underneath to prevent computer sliding across surfaces when in use
- Sufficient memory and speed (for applications used)
- "Add-ons" that improve usability and reduce maintenance time, such as (removable) CD-ROM drives and additional memory
- Lightweight non-branded carrying case with handle and shoulder straps (or normal rucksack with extra padding inside – this will disguise the fact that you are carrying a laptop at all)

Working on a Laptop

- Find a posture in which can keep your wrists straight (neutral, in line with your forearms), your shoulders relaxed and your back supported, and in which you feel comfortable.
- Align the laptop centrally with your body – don't twist round to use it.
- Take frequent breaks from working on your laptop, and get up and stretch and walk around, at least once an hour and more frequently if possible.
- Change your posture often, whenever it becomes even slightly uncomfortable; don't stay in one position for more than 15 minutes or so.
- Rest your eyes frequently by looking at something far away or by closing them, for a minute or two.
- Remember to blink more, to prevent your eyes feeling dry.
- Take whatever software training you can because the more skilled you are with the programmes you use, the less time you will need to spend on the laptop.
- Make sure the laptop is supported and stable and will not wobble and slide as you work.
- Adjust your laptop screen angle (and height if possible) to reduce stretching your neck, and to minimise glare on the screen.
- If possible, if using the laptop for long periods, attach the external full size keyboard and an external mouse.
- Think before you use the laptop – try to cut down intensive usage
- If you are sharing the laptop, eg in a teaching session, try to move the laptop round to face each person in turn, rather than each stretch to reach it.