

What is dystonia?

Dystonia is uncontrollable and sometimes painful muscle spasms caused by incorrect signals from the brain. It affects at least 70,000 in the UK. Dystonia is a neurological movement disorder that results in abnormal postures or movements, with or without tremor. It is believed to originate in the basal ganglia, an area deep within the brain that is involved in the control of movement.

Much research is being undertaken and progress is being made towards a better understanding of this abnormality.

Botulinum toxin injections

If treatment is necessary, then the use of botulinum toxin injections, which temporarily weaken specific muscles, can be very effective. Injections have to be repeated every three months or so.

There are many muscles in the hand and forearm that are involved in writing or playing music, and so careful observation to identify which muscles are causing the problem is needed. Often electromyography (EMG – a tool that helps identify which muscles are affected most by the dystonia) is used. Sometimes the muscles can be weakened too much by the injections, but if this occurs it is always temporary.

Helpline: 0845 458 6322

What the Society offers

The **Dystonia Society** is dedicated to providing information and support to everyone affected by dystonia in the UK and to raising awareness of the condition.

The Society is also committed to ensuring that everyone with dystonia has access to the treatments they need.

- **Our helpline** offers an opportunity to discuss concerns in confidence and to obtain information on dystonia.

Helpline: 0845 458 6322

- **Our regional support groups** run by volunteers provide an opportunity to share experiences and meet others.
- **Our website** has information on dystonia and a lively forum. The address is www.dystonia.org.uk. You can also sign up on the website for our free **e-newsletter**.
- **The organisation** supports research into potential treatments and ways of coping.
- **Join us** – become a member and receive our quarterly newsletter. Call: 0845 458 6211 or email info@dystonia.org.uk.

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Focal Hand dystonia

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Focal hand dystonia ?

Focal hand dystonia causes involuntary movement, cramps or tremor in the hand or arm muscles usually when making highly practiced hand movements such as writing or playing a musical instrument. Focal hand dystonia is often called writer's cramp or musician's cramp.

Writer's cramp

When focal hand dystonia affects writing, this is called writer's cramp. Writing can become painful and written work less legible. There are two types: simple and dystonic.

Simple writer's cramp is usually caused by over-use of the hand, poor writing posture or poor penhold. The resulting muscle strain can cause the writer to press down too hard on the paper and can lead to spasms and pain.

Symptoms of simple writer's cramp only appear during writing and include some or all of the

following:

- Gripping the pen too hard
- Extension of the finger during writing making the pen difficult to hold
- Unusual postures of the wrist or elbow

These can make writing very difficult. Sometimes tremor is also a symptom although this is unusual. In many cases, symptoms are exacerbated by tension.

In a minority of cases, difficulties in writing are caused by **dystonic writer's cramp** which may occur together with a more generalised dystonia that can affect other parts of the body as well. In this case, the involuntary movements and muscle cramps can also be apparent when undertaking other non-writing tasks such as using a knife and fork or applying makeup etc.

There is no cure for writer's cramp but many individuals benefit from techniques to help them 'retrain' their muscles and 'unwind' the problems with hand posture and pressure, one by one. Often there is a need to relax not only hands but attitudes to handwriting too.

Some people with writer's cramp can gain benefit from treatment with drugs either on their own or together with botulinum toxin injections. There are a variety of tablets that can be helpful,

although none are universally successful and side effects can occur.

Musician's cramp

Focal hand dystonia can affect any profession which requires repeated hand movement but is more common among musicians than any other professional group. Hand dystonia in musicians is often called musician's cramp.

Symptoms can include reduced precision when playing and loss of control of the hand including fingers curling or sticking. Sometimes the effects are quite subtle - but they often prevent playing to a professional standard.

The cause of musician's cramp is not fully understood but it appears that the motor control systems in the brain essential for performing music fail to work properly. Occasionally, the cramp may be related to another dystonia that can affect other parts of the body as well.

There is no cure but sometimes techniques can be found to enable the musician to use different motor control systems when playing. This could be by changing the position of keys on a wind instrument or using the opposite hand for bowing on the violin. Medication can also be helpful. Botulinum toxin injections are sometimes used - generally to facilitate new techniques rather than as a solution in themselves.