Some people find that writing becomes difficult due to tremor, involuntary movement or cramps in their hand or arm muscles. This is called writer’s cramp. In these cases, writing can become a painful activity and written work can become far less legible.

In many cases, writer’s cramp is caused by over-use of the hand or use of inefficient writing strategies such as poor writing posture or penhold. These can cause the muscles to consistently strain so causing a person to press very hard on the paper when writing which can then lead to spasms and pain.

In these cases, the wrist and fingers are often held in unusual postures making gripping the pen and writing very difficult. Sometimes the tremor that comes on when writing is the major problem rather than abnormal posture. In many cases, symptoms are exacerbated by tension.

There is no cure for writer’s cramp but many individuals can gain significant benefit from spending time with a specialist who will help them understand how the problems arose and may suggest 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. In these cases, relief is literally in one’s own hands.

Dystonic writer’s cramp

In a minority of cases difficulties in writing are due to a form of dystonia that affects the hand and arm muscles. In cases of dystonic writer’s cramp, 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.

What is dystonia?

Dystonia is a neurological movement disorder. It causes involuntary muscle contractions which lead the affected parts of the body to develop abnormal movements or postures, with or without tremor. Dystonia is believed to be the result of the abnormal functioning of 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.

If treatment is necessary for dystonia, 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, 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.

Some people with writer’s cramp can gain benefit from treatment with drugs either or 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.

“I am learning that whatever dystonia throws at me in my life, there is another path I can take”
“Knowing there are others who understand what it’s like to live with dystonia, who I can talk to and meet up with, really helps me cope”

What the Society can offer

- **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 and the needs of everyone affected.

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

- **Our Helpline** is open Mondays – Fridays between 10am – 4pm and offers an opportunity to discuss concerns in confidence, and to obtain information on dystonia and its various treatments, including ways of making living with dystonia easier.

- **Local support** is provided via the Society’s regional support groups run by the Society’s team of volunteers.

- **The organisation** encourages and supports research into potential treatments and practical ways of coping with the condition.

- **Join us** – become a member and receive our quarterly newsletter. Call: 0845 458 6211.

Helpline: 0845 458 6322