

Tips to Help Guitarists Stay Injury-Free

By Dr. Tim Lahn

Playing the guitar requires hand strength, fine motor skills, and endurance. Whether you play folk ballads or thrash metal, you need to take care of your body in order to meet the physical demands your instrument presents you with. If you're not feeling your best, you can't play at your best! Here are a few tips to help keep your body functioning at 100% while you're playing.

1) Warm up properly

Every good playing session starts with a good warm up. Each of your hands has 17 tiny unique muscles, and 18 muscles in your forearm that are working overtime while you play. The least you can do is get them ready to go first! Start each session by running your hands under warm water for 30 seconds while opening and closing your fingers repeatedly. This helps increase blood flow to the muscles and joints while soothing and relaxing the tissue. Next, spend 30 seconds rolling your wrists in clockwise circles, followed by counter clockwise circles. Your hands and forearms should now be ready to pick up your instrument and start some warm up drills. I won't get into specific exercises in this article, but scales, arpeggios, and string skipping exercises are a great place to start!



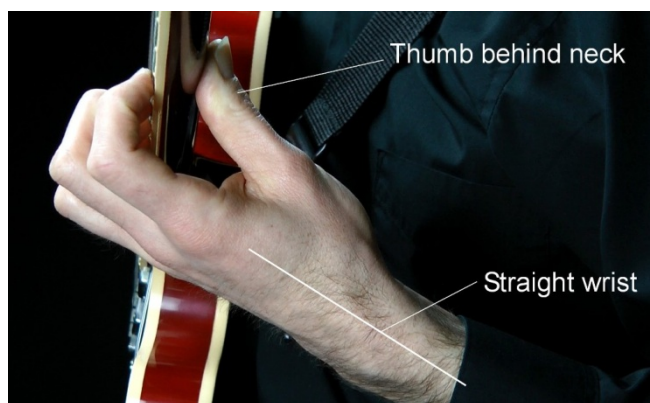
2) Keep both feet firmly planted on the ground as much as possible.

There are lots of great reasons to have your whole body weight supported mostly by one foot. Maybe the song really needs some volume swells, or a wah-wah effect. Maybe you just need to put your foot up on your amp to look cool. The reality is that the more evenly you can distribute your weight between both legs, the less strain there will be on your knee, hip, and low back while you play. It may not affect you much today, but 20 years down the line you'll be sorry if you don't.



3) Tighten up that strap.

Let's do an experiment together. Hold your hands up to your chest as if you are playing a guitar with the strap done up really tight. Notice how the wrist of your fretting hand is relatively straight. Now lower your hands slowly as if you're gradually loosening the strap. Do you notice how your wrist has to bend in order to keep your fingers wrapped around the neck? Your wrist is made up of 8 tiny bones called carpals that need to move independently of each other to allow your wrist to function properly. Keeping your wrist bent while you play puts a tremendous amount of stress on the joints between these bones, and can easily cause wrist injuries. Constant bending at the wrist also puts pressure on your median nerve, which can lead to the dreaded carpal tunnel syndrome, which can be a career ender for many guitarists. On top of that, the muscles in your forearms that control your fingers are at a mechanical disadvantage while your wrist is bent, making them have to work harder, and leaving them vulnerable to injury. Do your wrists and forearms a favor and tighten your strap up a few inches. Your body will thank you!



4) Vary where your guitar strap sits

Wearing a guitar strap for an extended period of time can put a lot of strain on your lower neck and shoulder. The placement of your strap can have a huge impact on what you feel. If your strap is really close to your neck, the muscles that hold up your shoulders have more leverage, and thus don't have to work as hard. However, this puts the area of highest pressure right over your brachial plexus, which is a bundle of nerves that runs into your arm. If you were to wear

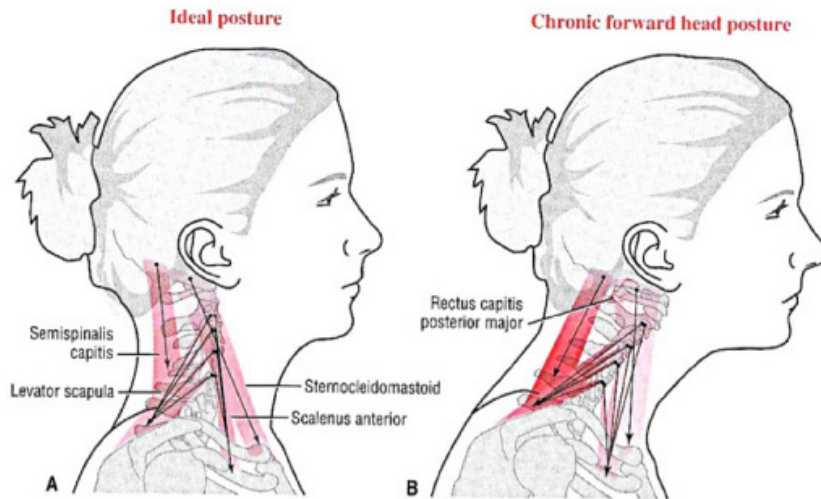
your guitar strap all the way on the furthest point possible, this means your muscles will be working harder, but you are sparing your nerves the pressure. Clearly there is no one best place to put your strap for a long time. The best solution to this problem is to move your strap to a slightly different position every 10 minutes or so. This will help distribute the strain on your body more evenly and avoid potential injuries. This tip is especially important if you play a heavier model of guitar such as the ever popular Les Paul. Lighter guitars such as Stratocasters are more forgiving, but these types of injuries can happen regardless of what you play!



5) Stand up tall, with your shoulders back

One problem I see consistently with guitarists is the tendency to slouch and roll their shoulders forward. As your torso and shoulders come forward, your neck will come forward as well. Your neck muscles have to work harder to hold the weight of your head, which puts more strain on the joints in your neck. Now whenever you look down at your hands, the muscles in the back of your neck (which are already working hard) will have to lengthen to allow the motion. This puts them at a massive mechanical disadvantage, which will cause the muscle to strain after a prolonged period of time.

To prevent this, stand up tall and pull your shoulders back. You should feel your shoulder blades move closer to the middle of your spine. Now tuck your chin back slightly. This may be uncomfortable if you have had a forward head posture for some time. If this is the case, consult a chiropractor or other manual therapist who has experience with guitarists to help improve your posture and address the shortened and weakened muscles that contribute to the way you stand.



6) Finish your session with stretching

You've now finished performing or practicing, and your fingers have had a good workout. Now is the time to stretch out your muscles to keep them from tightening up! Start by holding your arm out in front of you with your palm facing up. With your opposite hand, grab your fingers and thumb and gently pull down, extending the wrist, until you feel a stretch in the top of your forearm. Hold that stretch for at least 30 seconds, and relax. Next, stretch out the other side of your forearm by turning your palm down, and use your other hand to flex the wrist until you feel a stretch. For an added stretch, try to close your hand into a fist.



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I hope you have found these tips useful. Using proper technique, posture, and taking time to warm up and cool down can make a world of difference in the way you feel and play. If you have any questions, feel free to contact me at tlahn@owcacre.com.

About the Author

Dr. Tim Lahn is a Chiropractor and avid musician in Barrie, Ontario. He is passionate about treating musicians with injuries, and educating them about their bodies and the unique challenges presented by their instruments of choice. His ultimate goal is to get his patients back to the studio and the stage, doing what they love to do. To book an appointment or a free consultation, call Optimum Wellness Centres (www.optimumwellnesscentres.com) in Barrie at (705) 792-5593 or our support centre at 1(855) 225-5692. To reach Dr. Tim Lahn directly contact tlahn@owccare.com



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