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Video gamers jump off the couch

By Brian Baker

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LIMBERING UP: Doctors Liza Egboah and Rhuel Maano talk their client Mike Lynds through a session using Nintendo's *Wii Fit* video game to help him with his overall physical fitness.

Shredding riffs to your favourite rock songs in *Guitar Hero* or doing yoga on Nintendo's *Wii Fit* can increase your eye-hand coordination, improve memory and help in rehabilitation from serious injuries.

And that's music to the ears of gamers.

Game manufacturers are introducing active games — like *Guitar Hero*, *Rock Band* and *Wii Fit* — to encourage many to get off their keisters and play.

The trend has even caught the attention of rehabilitation centres across North America, including the clinic in Toronto's financial district.

President and co-founder Dr. Rhuel Maano says the use of pop-culture technology in the healthcare industry is a positive one.

His clinic uses Nintendo's Wii with its high-end corporate clientele to keep them interested in fitness.

"One of the great things I've found with Nintendo is that it's just so accessible, regardless of what age you are," Maano says.

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"Everything is just so intuitive ... the way Nintendo has designed their console that within a few minutes everyone just gets a hang of how to do it, and they're having fun."

Wii Fit allows gamers to perform yoga, strength training, aerobics and balancing on a board that connects to the console much like a regular controller.

Matt Okura, an avid gamer from the Yonge and Davisville area, is a proud owner of several consoles and enjoys unwinding after a day of work with controller in hand.

"(Wii) is super addictive, well *Guitar Hero* is anyway," he says with a laugh. "Lets all those non-band members be in their favourite bands, and you get to play your favourite songs and play with your friends online."

However, Okura points out that after longterm gameplay, the world seems to float away. Literally.

Gamers have often complained about their vision floating upwards.

Steve Engels, a computer science professor at the University of Toronto, acknowledges Okura's visual distress.

"With *Guitar Hero* and all its visuals, you wouldn't have that weird feeling afterwards unless your focus was completely diverted on what was being

shown on the screen," he said.

Some critics are concerned that the fast-moving visuals can cause epileptic episodes, but Engels hasn't heard of that actually occurring.

Labels on the back of games do warn of seizures and repetitive injuries, but researchers say the risk is minimal if gameplay is kept in check.

"What you have to keep in mind is it's the same with anything you do for too long," Maano says.

But University of Toronto psychology professor Ian Spence, who researches video games' effects on cognition, doesn't rule out the risk of seizures.

"It stands to reason that games with rapidly changing visual stimuli might do this for a very small number of individuals," Spence says.

Video games could be used for improving spatial recognition and memory, but research funding is needed, he adds.

"Certainly video games are a new form of entertainment but unlike radio, movies, or TV they are a participatory form," Spence says.

Though concerns of inactivity are consistent, Engels says it's not something to be overly concerned about.

"It's no more disturbing than anything else," he says. "Where a husband gets really immersed in a football game, or some get really into the song they're listening to.

"On the converse side, the Wii has made (video games) into a family activity, whereas parents in the past could only look at their kids, watch them, and sort of hope for the best."