

Keyboard and mouse alternatives

If you find using a keyboard or mouse challenging then there are lots of ways to help, either by modifying software or hardware. Here are some of the options.

Ergonomic keyboards

Ergonomic keyboards like Microsoft's Natural Keyboard (from £25) are a popular choice. These keyboards have a split in the middle and are gently sloped which encourages a more natural hand, wrist, and forearm position. I know that many people with ataxia use these keyboards and find them very comfortable to use.

Key guards

Key guards are basically rigid plates with holes in them, when the plate is placed over the keyboard the holes are positioned over each key. This makes it impossible to press two keys at once. Another benefit is that you are able to rest your hands and arms on the keyboard without inadvertently hitting the keys. Key guards are available from Maxess Products (www.maxesssite.co.uk/html/mpkeykey.html).

Voice recognition software

Voice recognition software like Dragon NaturallySpeaking (www.scansoft.co.uk/naturallyspeaking/) converts your spoken words into typed text. Many have mixed results depending on the quality of their speech, but they can work very well even with speech that is somewhat slurred.

Adjusting repeat and delay rates

Slowing down the **repeat delay** (amount of time that passes before a character repeats when you hold down a key), and the **repeat rate** (the speed at which a character repeats when you hold down a key) can be extremely beneficial to those with stiff/slow fingers. This can be done by opening the Mouse Properties in the Control Panel, selecting the Speed tab and dragging the arrows on the repeat delay and repeat rate sliders to the left (to decrease) or right (to increase).

Togglekeys

Togglekeys allows you to hear a tone when pressing a certain key. I mention this one because I've found it especially useful. I'm pretty sure I'm not the only one who often accidentally hits the Caps Lock key and only finds out when looking up at the screen after typing an entire paragraph of capital letters. Now every time I hit the Caps Lock key my computer beeps. You can turn off this feature by opening Accessibility Options in the Control Panel, selecting the Keyboard tab, checking the Use Togglekeys check box and tweaking the settings.

Word predictive software

This software can improve speed by predicting which word the user is about to type. An example of this software, Penfriend XP, can be found at www.penfriend.biz/.

Trackballs

If you find moving a mouse around to control the cursor difficult, I recommend trying a trackball. Trackballs themselves are static and have the usual two buttons along with a ball which you roll either with your finger or your thumb to control the cursor. They cost from around £25.

The Assistive Mouse Adapter – for those who have tremors

This piece of hardware works in conjunction with a regular mouse and filters out the unintentional movements of the hand caused by a tremor. More information on this product can be found at www.montrosesecam.com

MouseKeys

Activating MouseKeys allows you to control the cursor using the numeric keypad. You can turn on the feature by opening Accessibility Options in the Control Panel, selecting the Mouse tab, checking the Use MouseKeys check box and tweaking the settings.

Pointer speed

You can adjust how fast the cursor moves on screen by opening the Mouse Options in the Control Panel, selecting the Pointer Options tab and dragging the arrow on the select a pointer speed slider to the left (to decrease) or right (to increase).

Double-click speed

Double-clicking is my biggest gripe but there is a way to adjust how much time Windows will allow between clicks. You can do this by opening the Mouse Options in the Control Panel, selecting the Buttons tab and dragging the arrow on the speed slider to the left or right.

Pointer schemes

I was really struggling to see my little white arrow in Windows, especially when working on a white background, so I now use a big black arrow which is much better. You can do this by opening the Mouse Options in the Control Panel, selecting the Pointers tab and choosing a different scheme.

Keyboard shortcuts

I find keyboard shortcuts a lot easier and quicker than using the mouse to navigate sometimes endless menus. A keyboard shortcut is activated by pressing a combination of keys simultaneously. A shortcut I use a lot is Alt + Tab which switches between open applications in Windows. A full list of shortcuts can be found at www.microsoft.com/enable/products/keyboard.aspx.

Further information on making your computer more accessible can be found at :

www.abilitynet.org.uk/

www.microsoft.com/enable/

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