

We've probably all been told to "stand up straight, shoulders back, don't slouch" at some point in our lives. What we may not realise, is how damaging a bad posture can be not only to our physical health but in many other aspects of our mental health and wellbeing, and even more so as we age.

Posture is essentially how you hold your body, in sitting and standing or lying down. It can be really important for your comfort and health.

There are actually two types of posture:

- Dynamic posture is how you hold yourself when you're moving your body, for example during walking or running.
- Static posture is how you hold yourself when you're not moving, for example when you're standing, sitting, or sleeping.

YOUR BODY AS A TENT

Consider your body posture as a tent. The rigid poles hold the canvas up, and form the main structure. The poles can't stand upright without the help of guy-ropes and pegs holding everything in place.

The tension in the guy-ropes needs to be balanced otherwise if one side is too tight (or loose) the opposite side sags or collapses. Similarly the strength and placement of the pegs holding the ropes is crucial so they don't slip loose or snap and the side of the tent crumbles.

If you can imagine that, you'll know where I'm heading with this. Essentially your spine is the main central pole of the tent and your muscles are the guy-ropes. The muscles attaching to your spine and working around your spine need to be balanced in strength and length; otherwise they will load your spine unevenly or pull on spinal joints allowing it to 'cave in' on a side that is lacking support, or overload and damage structure on other side.

In the same way your tendons and ligaments are the pegs holding the muscles in place, ensuring they are strong and healthy, allows the muscles to work properly and in turn support and move your spine correctly. The goal of having good posture is to minimise strain on your spine and its supporting muscles, tendons, and ligaments, thereby allowing you to sit or stand with minimal effort, and avoiding the development of pain and stiffness.

Thanks to gravity, your feet are well-grounded, but keeping your body upright and in an optimal position, is the job of

How to Have Good Posture

(and Why You Should Care)



your postural muscles. If those muscles are working healthily and in balance, they prevent your bones and ligaments from being stressed, strained, and pulled out of alignment, as well as keep your head upright and aligned.

THE CURSE OF THE 21ST CENTURY

Unfortunately, modern lifestyles are becoming increasingly sedentary, whether that's through the use of transport, sitting at desks or computers, bingeing for hours on Netflix, or gaming and social media, your postural muscles are being used less and less.

Being relatively inactive throughout the day and not participating in regular physical activity can lead to weakness, meaning your postural muscles tire more easily. This in turn makes it harder to maintain a good posture when you are standing or sitting, so you slump, slouch more or lean on walls, tables or bus stops when standing. The relationship you have with your postural muscles may have flickered out over time, leaving your body at risk for spinal wear and tear and chronic pain.

Plenty of things can lead to bad posture, from old habits to health conditions affecting your spine. A lot of people just started slouching ages ago and never corrected it. It simply becomes a habit and over time your body accepts this to be the norm. However, other factors can also add to poor posture, like having your work desk set up in a way that leads

●● CONSIDER YOUR BODY POSTURE AS A TENT. THE RIGID POLES HOLD THE CANVAS UP, AND FORM THE MAIN STRUCTURE ●●



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0431072296

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to slouching throughout the day or regularly being hunched over your phone, texting, reading, or playing games.

The postures you assume provide clues to not only the condition of your body but also how you feel about yourself, your confidence (or lack of it), how much energy you have (or are lacking), how enthusiastic (or unenthusiastic) you feel, or whether you feel confident and relaxed (or anxious and tense). Intriguingly, you almost always adopt the same postures in response to the same emotions.

WHAT IS BAD POSTURE?

How do you know if you have bad posture? Well firstly consider a young child – they generally have good posture, when viewed from the side their back shows a graceful 'S' curve and their movements are easy and effortless.

So consider what you look like standing naked in front of a mirror. Do you have a flattened back or is it hunched over? Does your chin poke forward, are your shoulders level with each other? These are simple examples of what poor posture may look like.

Apart from obvious visual cues, symptoms of poor posture can include:

- Rounded shoulders
- Potbelly (and that's not just from poor diet and too many pints)
- Bent knees when standing or walking
- Head that either leans forward or backward
- Back pain
- Body aches and pains
- Muscle fatigue
- Headache
- Lack of fluidity when moving.

In certain cases, people have health conditions that contribute to bad posture. Scoliosis causes the spine to curve sideways in a way that can make a person's shoulders, waist, and hips uneven, so it's hard to have proper posture. Ankylosing



spondylitis, an inflammatory disease that can prompt some of the interlocking bones in the spine to fuse, can force a person to hunch over. There are cases like these that require specific medical attention, braces and even surgery.

However, for the majority of people, poor posture simply results from bad habits, weak or shortened muscles, a past injury that has not been adequately rehabilitated, lack of physical activity, or being overweight.

"So what?" you may say, "I am not bothered about what I look like". Agreed! This is not a vanity programme, it is however, a health and wellness consideration.

WHY DOES BAD POSTURE MATTER SO MUCH?

Having poor posture can affect your health in many ways, for example the resulting degradation of your spine can make you more prone to injury. You may also experience neck, shoulder, and back pain, headaches, decreased flexibility, loss of mobility, nerve entrapment, poor balance (potentially leading to falls), bad digestion, even difficulty breathing and reduced energy levels.

Knowing you need to improve your posture and knowing how to do it are two very different things however. The good news is that unless you have an underlying medical condition, most people can

perform specific exercises relevant to your body, and making changes to how you sit and stand, work at a desk or computer, will all help improve your posture (ask the practitioner who you gave you this leaflet, for the exercise sheets that go with it).

Good posture will help you in the following ways:

- Keep bones and joints in the correct position (alignment) so that muscles are being used optimally
- Cut down on the wear and tear of joint surfaces, such as the knee and spine, to help prevent the onset of arthritis
- Decrease the strain on the ligaments in the spine
- Prevent the spine from becoming fixed in abnormal positions
- Prevent fatigue because muscles are being used more efficiently, which allows the body to use less energy
- Prevent backache and muscular pain.

There is a psychological component to how you carry yourself. Studies suggest that better posture promotes better confidence and vice versa. This may help you in your work environment, going for a job interview or while presenting your next school assignment.

If you have even taken a moment (and you should) to stop and look up from your computer or phone while waiting at the bus stop or sitting on the park bench, you will notice that everyone's body and posture is different. In the same way therefore, everyone's need for advice and exercises to correct their posture will differ.

Musculoskeletal practitioners like physical therapists, osteopaths, chiropractors and massage therapists can all help by giving you specific exercises to help you strengthen weak muscles and stretch tight ones, thereby improving your posture.

Getting that perfect spine isn't always achievable or a quick fix, but small changes to daily routine, becoming more body conscious and performing exercises a couple of days a week will go a long way to helping improve your posture, reduce the risk of injury and prevent pain.

Click this link to watch an excellent and fun 4-minute TED-Ed animation on this topic <https://spxj.nl/2G7Echn>

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