

Posture and Your Health



Everyone knows good posture is important to your health. Your mother told you, your teachers told you, and now I am here to tell you that “Posture is Important”. However, I am going help facilitate your good posture by providing you with skills and strategies to help achieve and maintain good posture.

Poor posture has been implicated in contributing/causing a variety of musculoskeletal disorders including: headaches and neck pain, back pain, TMJ (temporomandibular joint pain), muscle fatigue, respiratory dysfunction, and a variety of body aches and pains. Also, poor posture can contribute to asymmetrical body alignments including rounded and forward shoulders, forward head, potbelly, as well as decreased and increased spinal curvature.

If good posture is important, then it is important to know its components. When talking about good posture, sitting is typically the time and place when good posture is most neglected. A good sitting posture consists of:



- Feet flat on floor: Hips and knees bent 90 degrees
- Sit on your sit bones (hips are tilted slightly forward)
- Maintain inward arch of the lower back: assist with a lumbar pillow/roll across low back

- Lift the breastbone: creates distance between rib cage and hips
- Pull shoulders back
- Make chin level (chin tuck)
- Brace Abdominals (belly button pulled toward spine)
- Take frequent breaks from sitting (walk/stretch)
- Good driving posture: sit tall, head on headrest, lumbar roll, seat vertical, elbows slightly bent with hands on steering wheel. Note: positioning the headrest behind the center of the back of the head (versus behind the neck) can help reduce/prevent whiplash injuries common in car accidents.

Good posture is a habit, and thus can be changed. How do you keep and maintain good posture? Here are some important tips:

- ◆ Listen to your body: It will tell you when it is in a poor postural position
- ◆ Make signs to “sit tall” or “don’t slouch” wherever you spend a lot of time sitting (car, couch, computer, etc.). I know it sounds corny, but the visual cues help remind you to keep good posture.
- ◆ Maintain the normal inward (lordosis) curve of your low back. A small pillow placed across the lower back can help.
- ◆ Exercise regularly (3x or more per week) to improve muscle tone and strength.
- ◆ Regularly (2-3x/week) stretch major muscle groups of the body.
- ◆ Avoid static sitting positions for sustained periods of time (walk/stretch).
- ◆ Good posture can make you look 10 pounds lighter and 10 years younger.
- ◆ Women: Don’t wear high heeled shoes, these shoes increases curvature of lumbar spine and place abnormal stresses on the feet.
- ◆ Key to good posture is awareness and perseverance. Make it habitual: Practice! Practice! Practice!

There are also specific exercises that can help you attain and maintain good posture. These exercises can be done almost anytime/anywhere, so not having the time or place to do them is not an excuse. Some good daily postural exercises that I recommend include:

- **Chin Tuck:** Sit or stand with good posture (tall spine). Place your index finger on the front of your chin. Now, slowly remove your chin from your finger (not finger away from chin) and tuck the chin inward. Do not bend your neck, but keep it straight as you do this exercise. Hold this stretch for 30 seconds and repeat twice. If done correctly, you will feel the back of the top of your neck being stretched. This exercise can also be done against the wall to facilitate good technique.
- **Abdominal Bracing** (sitting/standing/lying on back): Place your index finger on your belly button. Slowly pull the belly button toward the spine by drawing the naval inward (think of hollowing your lower abdominal region). Hold this “hollowed” position for five seconds, then relax for five seconds. Perform this bracing/relaxation sequence twenty times and then repeat. This exercise activates the deepest of the abdominal muscles called the transversus abdominus. This

muscle acts like a corset around the lumbar spine, providing stability and support for the spine needed to maintain good posture.

○ **Diaphragmatic Breathing:** It is hard to believe that proper breathing can help with good posture, but do not doubt the importance of this exercise for good posture. The respiratory diaphragm has musculotendinous attachments directly to the lumbar vertebrae, providing needed support for the spine. Like any muscle, with disuse it atrophies and weakens. Before you do this exercise, you must first assess how you breathe. To do this assessment, sit or stand sideways from a mirror. Place one hand on your chest, and one hand on your belly. Breathe normally and watch to see which hand(s) move. Most people develop a shallow breathing pattern in which they use their chest/neck muscles to lift the ribcage upward during inspiration. If you see the hand on your chest doing all/most of the moving when you breathe, then you are classified as a “chest breather”. Chest breathers are more at risk for posture problems (due to neglect of the respiratory diaphragm), as well as neck and shoulder problems due to overuse of the “accessory respiratory muscles” they are using 24/7 for breathing.

For this exercise, when you breathe (using the mirror for feedback) make the hand on your belly move (outward on inspiration, inward on expiration), and don't allow the hand on your chest to move. It will probably seem pretty foreign at first, but with practice it can become quite natural. If you see your hand on the belly doing all/most of the moving, then you do not have to do this exercise because you are already activating your diaphragm for respiration.

Through consistent practice of good posture, performing your “postural exercises” regularly, and consistently strengthening and stretching the major muscle groups of the body, you too can have good posture. These good posture habits will help decrease the likelihood of you developing posture related body pain.

* Always consult a health/medical expert before beginning an exercise program.

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