

Be Kind Mind your posture to your Spine

by Dr Michael Soon

HAVING A GOOD posture is more than cosmetic. It is an important aspect of keeping your spine healthy. It can prevent neck and back pain from occurring or worsening.

Back (to) Basics

Looking at the spine from the side, it forms an S-shape, with the neck (cervical spine) and lower back (lumbar spine) curving forwards. If you imagine someone walking like a lord, with his arms behind his back, you will recognise the forward curve of the lower back. Conversely, the thoracic spine (the chest part of the spine) is curved backwards, to allow more space for the lungs.

Apart from holding us upright, the spine is curved as it also functions like a coiled spring, to enable the spine to move, absorb shock and maintain balance. Having a good posture is essentially about putting the spine in positions where the least strain is placed on the supporting structures (muscles, ligaments, discs). These positions can occur with standing, walking, sitting and lying down.

Why is this important? Good alignment of the spine means that pressure on the joints is lessened, muscles will be less fatigued and there is decreased stress on the ligaments/discs, hence preventing neck and back pain, and overuse problems.

Posture Perfect

Many of the points raised in this article would seem to be common sense, but with the pressures of modern living and work, poor posture can become second nature, which can start and aggravate a spinal problem. Look around you and you will probably find someone hunched over in his office chair staring at his computer, another person cradling his phone between his ear and shoulder while typing away, or perhaps someone slouching in his car while driving.

Take a Stand

Let's start with standing posture. Ideally, your chin should be tucked in, with your earlobes over your shoulders; shoulder blades back; and tummy tucked in. One quick way to check is to stand with your back against a wall, with your



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shoulders and bottom touching the wall. In this position, your head should also touch the wall, and you should notice that your shoulder blades are opened up properly and not slouched. This can help eradicate both neck ache and upper shoulder ache.

Having good muscle tone that supports the curves of the spine is also important, hence the emphasis on core exercise. These are simply exercises that strengthen the muscles in the front and rear of the spine, which act like an internal corset, to stabilise the spine. Although these are not strictly postural, they are an important component to complement a good posture.

Sitting Pretty

Having a good sitting posture is a particular bugbear of many office workers. You can quickly make sure you are seated well using the 90 degrees rule. Ensure your hips are flexed at 90 degrees when sitting, with your knees flexed at 90 degrees and ankles at 90 degrees. Still can't get it? Here's another way. Sit in your chair and slouch completely. Then draw yourself up and accentuate the curve of your back as far as possible, and then relax slightly. That's a good sitting posture.

If possible, adjust your computer screen so it's at eye level or tilt the screen upwards. Try to keep your chin back, positioned above the shoulders, not craning forward. When I had trouble with my neck due to bad posture, I even wore a soft neck collar temporarily to remind me and to re-train my habits.

Another common issue with prolonged sitting is pain



when moving around the shoulder blades. This is oftentimes mistaken for a shoulder injury, but in reality, it is due to poor posture and immobility.

This brings me to my next point. The body is meant for motion. No matter how good your posture or chair is (even if it's the Herman Miller Aeron chair), you need to stretch. I tell my patients who sit for long periods at work to take a one-minute break every hour, to stand up and stretch the stiff muscles of the neck, shoulder blades and back.

If you drive, your posture is also important. On occasion, you may see a driver sitting so far away from the steering wheel that his entire arm is fully extended, while the seat back is reclined significantly. While some may think this is a cool position to drive, it's actually bad for the neck and back.

In fact, if you listen to car speed driving experts, they recommend a more upright posture as well as a much shorter distance from the steering wheel. Their recommendations are based on ability to steer and control at speed. This is also the right posture to decrease neck and back strain. So if you want to be a race car driver, start being healthier and practise good posture while driving.

Sleep, Don't Weep

Considering the fact that we spend one-third of our life sleeping, sleeping posture is also extremely important. A relatively firm mattress is usually required, although individual preference should also be considered.

The main aim is to sleep in a position that maintains the normal curve of the spine. Hence, a pillow should be under your head and not your shoulder, and of a height that allows your head to be in a normal position – which depends on whether you are a back sleeper or side sleeper, whether you have a normal-shaped head or a flat head. Be honest with your assessment and choose the right pillow. An orthopaedic pillow may not be suitable for everyone. If you also have back pain, a pillow under the knees can also help.

Lastly, another cause of bad posture is tense muscles. Some people may thus find treatments like yoga, massage, and manipulation useful to relax muscles. Combined with postural awareness and maintenance of muscle flexibility and strength, the spine can be significantly protected and many problems can be avoided. ^{eh}



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