

Straighten up!

Your guide to good posture

Most people know that hunching over can cause back and neck aches, but usually don't realise that bad posture can also affect other areas and systems of the body. The spine is connected to your brain and transports messages to areas of your body. So if your posture isn't the best, your spine suffers, which, in turn, can create health problems.

Incorporate these ideas into your daily routines to improve your posture and health...

Care for your back while you care for your baby

If you have a baby in the house, you'll know what extra joy and extra pressure they can add to your life. Chiropractor Joseph J Ierano from the Chiropractors Association of Australia says there are a range of ways to take the pressure off your back while you care for your baby. He suggests having the change table at a non-bending height, supporting the baby with a pillow during feeding, and

encouraging your partner to become more involved.

From the personal training point of view, personal trainer Katie Honey says it's also important to vary the way you hold your baby. "Change from one side to the other," she says. "Alternate between holding the baby over your shoulder, on your hip, etc. These different positions are good for the baby as well as for the adult who is carrying them."

Sleep right for sweet mornings

We spend around a third of our lives in bed, so it's important to consider how we sleep. Dorn spinal therapist Barbara Simon says the best sleep position is lying on the back and having a strong supportive pillow for the neck and head. But if you want to sleep on your side, Barbara explains it's important to have a firm mattress. "Make sure the spine is not curved the whole night, which happens when you sink into a mattress because it's too soft. An orthopedic-shaped, firm pillow is good for support

and to keep the cervical spine straight. The worst position to sleep in is certainly on the tummy as the head is turned the whole time and often it also puts a lot of strain on the back depending on the firmness of the mattress."

Work on your posture at work

Barbara suggests you sit with uncrossed legs and make sure your lower back contacts as much of the chair's back as possible. "When you lose contact it means you start slouching," she says. "A good way to support this is to move the chair right under the desk – this makes it more difficult to slouch." It's also important to not sit for hours on end staring at the screen. It's recommended to take a break every 30 minutes to do some neck, wrist and shoulder stretches, followed by a quick stand and reach to the sky.

If your job has you on your feet all day, rather than tied to a desk, you still have some ways of caring for your back. "When standing for longer



Slouching with a bent back can cause health problems

longer periods of time, make sure your knees are not completely locked and the pelvis is slightly tucked in rather than sticking your bottom out like a ballet dancer. This takes the strain off the lower back and makes standing easier. It is also good to sway the body slightly from foot-to-foot to keep in movement," says Barbara.

Start the day with exercise

One of the best ways to prepare your body for the rigours of the day is by building support muscles. As a personal trainer, Emma encounters many people complaining of lower back and neck pain. "This is mainly caused by sitting too much and computers," she says.

"Even with a good chair, sitting all day will tire your back, and make you slump over, so almost all the programs I write are to strengthen posture."

Emma works on relaxing the upper trapezium (muscle that goes from the base of the neck, out to the shoulders) and building up postural muscles – the rhomboids. The stomach muscles are also important, but Emma says thankfully the days of doing 500 crunches are over. "Core exercises focus on more subtle movements and utilising deeper abdominal muscles. These act like a corset, supporting your lower and upper back, and allowing other muscles to work correctly. Incorporating correct breathing, stretching and learning to manage

stress are also factors in postural awareness, and better wellbeing."

Emma recommends turning your head to the side, and very gently pulling it down so that your nose is heading toward your armpit. "If you're really tight, you'll feel this all through your upper back, and sometimes heading down toward your lower back as well. Both sides need to be stretched evenly."

Posture specialists

If you have tried correcting your posture, but are still experiencing neck or back pain, it might be time to consider therapy. There are many choices available and these include the Alexander technique, Dorn therapy, chiropractics and physiotherapy.

Alexander technique

This is an Australian-invented therapy developed over 100 years ago and based on the idea that the way we think about moving greatly affects its quality and ease. Helen Thurloe, a teacher of the Alexander Technique, says this path to good posture is a learned skill, not a treatment. If you want to gain the benefits of the technique, join in lessons, which help you become aware of your subconscious movement habits. "You can make constructive choices to use your whole self with more ease, grace and economy, and suffer less wear and tear as a result," says Helen. "For many people, including myself, the Alexander Technique is literally life-changing and life-enhancing, and can continue to make a real difference to quality of life well into your 80s and even 90s."

Dorn spinal therapy

This is a gentle therapy, which is popular in Europe, and is now becoming more available in Australia. It doesn't involve any violent manipulation and is a holistic treatment because Dorn therapists look at the whole body structure to discover where the origins of the pain are, rather than just locating the symptom area. "The treatment also includes a massage of the back with focus on the spine and therefore gives the client a good possibility to relax after the physical treatment," says Barbara. Many people have found Dorn therapy particularly helpful in cases where other treatments have been unsuccessful.

"Dorn spinal therapy always starts with checking for differences in leg length. Having balanced leg length is very important for the posture because when we stand unevenly, our whole body becomes uneven. Balancing the leg length means balancing the base for the pelvis and therefore for the spine.

"The next step is to balance the pelvis to provide a stable base for the



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spine to stand on, and then we move on to the spine where we check each vertebra for any type of misalignment. Using the thumb and the motion of our client, we work very gently on massaging the misaligned vertebra back into position. The motion of the client helps the spine and the muscles to become distracted and makes the work easier. We don't need any cracking or violent movements and we never go beyond a person's pain threshold," she says.

Chiropractics

Chiropractors recognise that everyone has an innate recuperative ability, and that the nervous system coordinates health and all physiology. The nervous system is protected by a bony skeleton, which can potentially interfere with function. The neck and back are thus potential complicators or instigators of poor health.

Chiropractors practice precise spinal adjustive and generalised manipulative and mobilisation techniques. This encompasses all types of active and passive measures aimed at maintaining proper spinal function, including rehabilitation and prevention.

Physiotherapy

Physiotherapists care for their clients by selecting appropriate and safe techniques to treat neck and back pain. Physiotherapists use different methods and are skilled in the assessment, diagnostic decision-making and treatment of patients with neck and back pain resulting from a musculoskeletal disorder. **NH**

For more information on good posture contact: www.alexandertechnique.org.au, www.backcare-professionals.com, www.physiotherapy.asn.au, www.chiropractors.asn.au, Emma Honey: 0413 040 556.