

## Posture

Most people will automatically sit bolt upright at the very mention of "posture". They straighten their back, retract their shoulders and lift the chin. We adopt this very vertical arrangement with the good intent of staying in this position for as long as we remain seated at the desk. Only a few minutes later when distracted by work, we soon find ourselves slumped forwards with our head closer to the computer screen followed by our shoulders and our upper back.

This forward 'slump' comes all too easy and often feels like a natural position. However, continually adopting this type of posture can lead to headaches, shoulder pain, neck pain and joint restrictions as well as digestion problems, changes in the shape of the spine and lack of sleep. Therefore knowing how to help prevent this poorly adopted posture could have real beneficial effects on your body, your health and your wellbeing.



- **What is good posture?**
- **What factors affect posture?**
- **How do we achieve good posture?**
- **How can an osteopath help?**

**What is good posture?** When used in the context of therapy: physiotherapy, manual therapy, osteopathy and chiropractic, the term posture is more accurately thought of as the **relationship of the various body parts**, their anatomical arrangement, and how well these parts fit together and move. Put a little more simply, posture is: **the ability to maintain good body position whilst static or during movement.**

During day-to-day activities, good posture helps us keep the muscles evenly taut. Our muscles attach to our bones and joints via their tendons and therefore it makes sense that any uneven tension may pull a joint slightly out of 'neutral'. Over short periods of time this is generally not a problem, but over months or even years this can affect the joint cartilage, ligaments and muscles, leading to weakness, discomfort, compensation and early arthritis. The benefits of maintaining good posture include:

- **Helps to decrease the abnormal wearing of joints**
- **Decreases stress on ligaments that support the spine and other joints**
- **Prevents the spine from becoming 'fixed' in abnormal positions**
- **Helps prevent overuse strains**
- **Reduces backache and muscular pain**
- **Contributes to an upright and more appealing appearance**

### What factors affect posture?

A multitude of factors can affect how our bodies stand, sit, move and function; these factors can be anatomical, such as a curved spine, pathological from illness or disease, or from injury during sport or an accident. Generally speaking two of the most common problems in today's world tend to be **occupational** and **lack of exercise.**



The enormous use of computers, phones and tablets, enhanced even further by the limitless amount of App's and games allow us to develop this **'hunched over'** appearance, which shortens the muscles in front of the body whilst stretching and tensioning those behind. This **'kyphotic'** or forward posture over time can become the norm if not corrected. Prolonged poor posture also causes the spine itself to change shape, putting undue stress on joints, tendons and ligaments resulting in early **wear and tear.** The longer this goes on, the more difficult it is to correct.

### How do we achieve good posture?



It can be difficult to know if you have poor posture, and even more difficult to know how to correct it. As a guide, common occurrences tend to be **rounded shoulders, forward head** and an **arched or flat** lower back. Several other issues may also be a factor such as flat (pronated) feet, **tight hamstrings, rotated hips, hyper-extended knees** etc. To address these issues properly you should seek advice from a professional who practices in this area.

In the meantime you could help yourself by being more active or by possibly adjusting your exercise programme to target other muscles. **Muscles work in pairs**, therefore it make sense if you train the muscles at the front, you also need to train the ones at the back otherwise you create an imbalance.

**Yoga and Pilates** are great ways to stretch and work shortened or tight muscles as well as opening up the joints through the back and pelvis relieving compression, whilst at the same time creating stronger **core muscles**. Exercises such as **swimming** and **rowing** are great for opening up the chest and working the back and shoulder muscles whilst at the same time are fantastic cardiovascular exercises, let's not forget the heart!

Reviewing your seating position at work could also make a huge difference. If your seat is too high or too low, this may stress and irritate the joints and muscles of the lower back and neck by making them compress or overstretch. If you suffer with this and can't seem to get it right, it may be worth asking someone qualified to **check your seating position** and adjust it accordingly. Common occurrences which cause problems are often a **slumped position, forward head** and **rounded shoulders**, no elbow rests, sitting too far forward and **wrapping the ankles around the bottom of the chair legs**, which shortens the hamstrings.

When it comes to exercise, the key is **variety** and **keeping it balanced**. We all tend to do the exercise we enjoy most which is great, but this can lead to neglecting other areas and leaving you vulnerable to imbalance. Always try and vary the type of exercises to engage more muscles and build a more complete programme. **The more aware** you are, the more likely you are to **make the changes** you need.

### How can an Osteopath help?

Osteopaths spend a great deal of time looking at posture and treating ailments related to poor posture. **An osteopath will initially assess your posture** from head to toe looking for areas of stiffness, unevenness, imbalance and weakness; this could be anything from pronated (flat) feet, a twisted pelvis, scoliosis (curve in the spine), through to an arthritic hip, knee or ankle.

If you suffer with pain or discomfort it may be beneficial to visit an Osteopath who should be able to identify the cause. Once this has been established the Osteopath may be able to relieve the pain or tension and help restore normal function through **treatment**, and in addition give you helpful **exercises** and **advice** to help manage or stop the problem re-occurring in the future.



***“By taking good care of your posture now, you will enjoy and savour lifelong health benefits and beauty.”***

*- Cindy Ann Peterson*

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