Posture

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Summary

- The complications of poor posture include back pain, spinal dysfunction, joint degeneration, rounded shoulders and a potbelly.
- Suggestions to improve your posture include regular exercise and stretching, ergonomic furniture and paying attention to the way your body feels.
- See your physiotherapist, osteopath, chiropractor or Alexander technique teacher for further information and advice.

If you want an example of good posture, just look at a young child – their back shows a graceful ‘S’ curve and their movements are easy and effortless. As we get older, bad habits such as slouching and inactivity cause muscle fatigue and tension that ultimately lead to poor posture. The complications of poor posture include back pain, spinal dysfunction, joint degeneration, rounded shoulders and a potbelly.

You can improve your posture and spinal health by making a few lifestyle adjustments. See your doctor, physiotherapist, chiropractor or Alexander technique teacher for further information and advice.

Symptoms of poor posture

Symptoms can include:

- Rounded shoulders
- Potbelly
- Bent knees when standing or walking
- Head that either leans forward or backward
- Back pain
- Body aches and pains
- Muscle fatigue
- Headache.

Postural mechanisms

Poor posture interferes with a number of the body’s postural mechanisms including:

- ‘Slow twitch’ and ‘fast twitch’ muscle fibres
- Muscle strength and length
- Nervous system feedback on the body’s position in space.

Two types of muscle fibres

Skeletal muscle is made up of two types of muscle fibre – static (often called ‘slow twitch’) and phasic (often called ‘fast twitch’). Generally, static muscle fibres are found in the deeper muscle layers. They help us to maintain posture without too much effort and contribute to balance by ‘sensing’ our position and relaying this information to the brain. Phasic muscle fibres are used for movement and activity.

Static fibres burn energy slowly and can keep working for a long time without tiring. However, phasic fibres quickly run out of steam. Poor posture causes muscle fatigue because it calls on the phasic fibres instead of static fibres to maintain the body’s position.

Muscle strength and length

Over time, poor posture that demands support from phasic fibres causes the deeper supporting muscles to waste away from lack of use. Weak, unused muscles tend to tighten and this shortening of muscle length can compact the bones of the spine (vertebrae) and worsen posture.

Nervous system feedback on the body’s position in space

The deeper layers of muscle are concerned with ‘sensing’ our position in space and relaying this information to the brain. If this function is taken over by muscles that mainly contain phasic fibres, the brain gets an incomplete picture. The brain assumes that the body needs to be propped up to counteract the effects of gravity, so it triggers further muscle contraction. This adds to the general fatigue and pain felt by the person with poor posture.

Listen to your body

Good posture feels effortless, which is why traditional ‘good posture’ suggestions like throwing your shoulders back and sticking out your chest may feel uncomfortable too. Instead, listen to your body. Make minor adjustments while standing and sitting. Which position feels the easiest and most graceful?

In most cases, concentrating on other tasks (such as work) can direct attention away from any feelings of physical discomfort. Get into the habit of regularly tuning in to your body. If you feel muscle tension or fatigue, move into another position.
Improve your general posture

Suggestions include:

- Remember the rule of ‘curve reversal’ – for example, if you’ve been leaning over your desk, stretch back the other way.
- Perform stretching exercises two or three times a week to boost muscle flexibility.
- Exercise regularly to improve muscle strength and tone.
- Stretch your neck muscles regularly by turning your head from one side to another.
- Your abdominal muscles support your lower back, so make sure they are in good condition. Do ‘abdominal crunches’ (lie on your back and curl your ribcage and pelvis as close together as possible) rather than straight-backed sit-ups (which exercise the muscles of the hips and thighs).
- Avoid standing on one foot for long periods of time.
- Cross your legs at the ankle, rather than the knee.

Maintain good posture

Suggestions include:

- Avoid sitting in soft, squashy chairs.
- Use lumbar rolls to support your lower back when sitting in regular chairs or driving the car.
- Switch to ergonomic chairs in the office or for any activity that requires you to sit for long periods of time.
- Make sure your mattress is supportive enough to keep your spine straight when lying on your side.
- Use a pillow that supports your neck.
- Keep your back straight and use your thigh muscles when lifting heavy weights.

Where to get help

- Physiotherapist
- Alexander technique teacher
- Osteopath
- Chiropractor

Things to remember

- The complications of poor posture include back pain, spinal dysfunction, joint degeneration, rounded shoulders and a potbelly.
- Suggestions to improve your posture include regular exercise and stretching, ergonomic furniture and paying attention to the way your body feels.
- See your physiotherapist, osteopath, chiropractor or Alexander technique teacher for further information and advice.

References

- Patient information, Australian Physiotherapy Association. More information here.
- Postural mechanisms, Alexander Technique Education, Australia. More information here.

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Bones muscles and joints

The following content is displayed as Tabs. Once you have activated a link navigate to the end of the list to view its associated content. The activated link is defined as Active Tab

- Bone muscle and joint basics
- Healthy bones muscles and joints
- Bone and bone marrow conditions
- Osteoporosis
- Muscle conditions
- Joint conditions
- Hand and foot conditions
- Back neck and spine conditions

Bone muscle and joint basics

- Bone marrow
  Bone marrow is the spongy tissue in the hollow centres of a person's long bones and is the blood cell 'factory'.
- Bones
  The adult skeleton is made up of 206 bones, which provide the structure for our bodies.
- Choosing the right shoe
  The right footwear can help keep your feet healthy, make your physical activity easier and help keep your body safe from injury.
Some athletes and bodybuilders wrongly believe that taking synthetic growth hormone will help build up their muscles.

A joint is the part of the body where two or more bones meet to allow movement.

The skeleton and skeletal muscles work together to allow movement.

There are about 600 muscles in the human body.

Healthy bones, muscles and joints

A balanced UV approach is required to ensure some sun exposure for vitamin D while minimising the risk of skin cancer.

Make stretching part of your life.

Reduce your intake of coffee, alcohol and soft drinks.

Exercise can prevent age-related changes to muscles, bones and joints and can reverse these changes too.

Most procedures that measure bone density are quick and pain-free.

If you don't have enough calcium in your diet, your bones will eventually become weak and brittle.

The right footwear can help keep your feet healthy, make your physical activity easier and help keep your body safe from injury.

Bad habits such as slouching and inactivity cause muscle fatigue and tension that ultimately lead to poor posture.

A balanced approach to sunlight exposure will help you get enough vitamin D while protecting against skin cancer.

Vitamin D is important for healthy bones, muscles and the nervous system.

Acromegaly is caused by an excess of growth hormone in adults, which causes the overgrowth of bones in the face, hands, feet and internal organs.

A person with amyloidosis produces aggregates of insoluble protein that cannot be eliminated from the body.

Bone cancer is a rare form of cancer that is treated with chemotherapy, radiotherapy or hormone therapy.

Common sites for bone fractures include the wrist, ankle and hip.

Fibrous dysplasia causes abnormal growth or swelling of bone, but it is not a form of cancer.

Leukaemia
Most children and many adults with acute leukaemia can expect to be cured, while chronic leukaemia can be successfully managed.

- **McCune-Albright syndrome**
The severity of symptoms or how a child with McCune-Albright syndrome will be affected throughout life is difficult to predict.

- **Multiple myeloma**
Multiple myeloma is cancer of plasma cells in the bone marrow.

- **Osteomyelitis**
Osteomyelitis means an infection of bone which can either be recent or longstanding.

- **Paget’s disease of bone**
Paget’s disease of bone is a chronic condition that causes abnormal enlargement and weakening of bone.

- **Rib injuries**
Rib injuries may include bruises, torn cartilage and bone fractures.

- **Rickets**
Rickets is a preventable childhood bone disease caused by a lack of vitamin D.

- **Scoliosis**
Scoliosis is an abnormal sideways curve of the spine.

- **Shin splints**
'Shin splints' refers to pain felt anywhere along the shinbone from knee to ankle.

- **Treacher Collins syndrome**
Treacher Collins syndrome is a genetic disorder that affects growth and development of the head, causing facial defects and hearing loss.

**Osteoporosis**

- **Menopause and osteoporosis**
Regular weight-bearing exercise and maintaining a diet rich in calcium from childhood will help reduce bone loss at menopause.

- **Osteoporosis**
A healthy, calcium-rich diet and regular physical activity throughout life can help prevent osteoporosis.

- **Osteoporosis and exercise**
Exercise can reduce the risk of fractures resulting from osteoporosis by both slowing the rate of bone loss, and reducing the person’s risk of falling by building muscle strength and improving balance.

- **Osteoporosis in children**
Osteoporosis in children is rare and usually caused by an underlying medical condition.

- **Osteoporosis in men**
Up to 30 per cent of all fractures that occur in people with osteoporosis and osteopenia, occur in men.

**Muscle conditions**

- **Bell’s palsy**
The majority of people with Bell’s palsy, around 90 per cent, will recover completely with time.

- **Helping a child with a disability with everyday activities**
If you have a child with a disability you can help improve their communication and movement by encouraging them to take part in daily activities.

- **Multiple sclerosis (MS)**
Multiple sclerosis is not contagious, but it is progressive and unpredictable.

- **Muscle cramp**
A muscle cramp is an uncontrollable and painful spasm of a muscle.

- **Muscular dystrophy**
People affected by muscular dystrophy have different degrees of independence, mobility and care needs.
• Myasthenia gravis
  Myasthenia gravis is an autoimmune disease that causes muscle weakness...

• Polymyositis
  Polymyositis is hard to diagnose and may be mistaken for muscular dystrophy...

• Spinal muscular atrophy (SMA)
  A child with spinal muscular atrophy type 1 rarely lives beyond three years of age...

• Sprains and strains
  It is important to get the correct treatment for a sprain or strain as soon as possible after the injury to help you recover quickly...

Joint conditions

• Ankle sprain
  Ankle sprain is a common sports injury caused by overstretching and tearing the supporting ligaments...

• Ankylosing spondylitis
  Ankylosing spondylitis (AS) is a type of inflammatory arthritis that targets the joints of the spine...

• Arthritis explained
  People can manage their arthritis using medication, physiotherapy, exercise and self-management techniques...

• Baker's cyst
  Baker's cysts of the knee don't always require active treatment and sometimes will only require observation by the treating doctor...

• Bursitis
  Bursitis is often caused by overuse and the inflammation will continue unless the particular activity or movement is stopped...

• Carpal tunnel syndrome
  Carpal tunnel syndrome can be caused by repetitive hand movements, pregnancy and arthritis...

• Developmental dysplasia of the hip (DDH)
  Around 95 per cent of babies born with developmental dysplasia of the hip can be successfully treated...

• Elbow pain
  Elbow pain can result from overuse in a range of sports or occupations...

• Hip disorders
  The hip joint is complicated to allow a wide range of motion while still supporting the weight of the body...

• Knee injuries
  Mild knee injuries may heal by themselves, but all injuries should be checked and diagnosed by a doctor or physiotherapist...

• Osgood-Schlatter syndrome
  Osgood-Schlatter syndrome is a painful knee condition that affects adolescents...

• Perthes' disease
  Most children with Perthes' disease eventually recover, but it can take anywhere from two to five years...

• Reactive arthritis
  Reactive arthritis is a form of arthritis that occurs as a result of some bacterial infections...

Hand and foot conditions

• Achilles tendonitis
  People who run regularly seem to be susceptible to Achilles tendonitis...

• Children's feet and shoes
  A child learning to walk receives important sensory information from the soles of their feet, and shoes can make walking more difficult...

• Choosing the right shoe
The right footwear can help keep your feet healthy, make your physical activity easier and help keep your body safe from injury...

- Cysts - ganglion cysts
  A ganglion cyst is the most common lump on the hand, and tends to target women between the ages of 20 and 40 years of age...

- Diabetes - foot care
  Good foot care and regular check-ups can help people with diabetes avoid foot problems...

- Dupuytren's contracture
  Dupuytren's contracture gradually causes clawing of the fingers as they are pulled towards the palm...

- Feet - problems and treatments
  Correctly fitted shoes help you avoid foot and leg pain or injury...

- Foot care - podiatrists
  Podiatrists can advise about how to choose the right shoes for your feet...

- Foot odour - causes and cures
  Even the most fastidiously clean people can suffer from foot odour...

- Foot orthoses
  People who have chronic foot or leg problems that interfere with their health may be prescribed orthoses by their podiatrist...

- Foot problems - heel pain
  The heel protects the structures of the foot, but heel pain is a common foot complaint...

- Footwear for healthy feet
  Wearing shoes that fit properly and support your feet is vital to avoid sore feet and to prevent or alleviate many common foot problems...

- Left-handedness
  If your child is naturally left-handed, don't try to force them to use their right hand...

- Raynaud's phenomenon
  Raynaud's phenomenon can be a sign of a more serious underlying condition, so see your doctor if you experience it...

- Sever's disease
  Sever's disease is a common cause of heel pain, particularly in the young and physically active...

Back neck and spine conditions

- Back pain
  Back pain is common. Some people will develop back pain that is persistent (lasts more than three months). There are many things that you can do to live well with back pain...

- Back pain in children
  Children with back pain may grow into adults with chronic bad backs, so it is important to encourage sensible back care...

- Living with persistent pain
  Pain is our built-in alarm system. It makes us aware that something might be going wrong in our body. However, there are many things you can do to deal effectively with persistent pain...

- Neck pain
  Treatments like physiotherapy, osteopathy or remedial massage can generally help neck and shoulder pain...

- Scoliosis
  Scoliosis is an abnormal sideways curve of the spine...

- Shoulder pain
  Shoulder pain is common in our community. The good news is that with appropriate treatment pain will improve so you can get back to doing the things you enjoy...

- Tendonitis
  Most cases of tendonitis recover completely, but severe untreated tendonitis can lead to rupture of the tendon...
Treating persistent pain

Pain is our built-in alarm system. It makes us aware that something might be going wrong in our body. However, there are many things you can do to deal effectively with persistent pain...

When do I need to see my doctor about persistent pain?

Living with persistent pain isn’t easy. Your doctor can help you balance your pain, your treatment and hurdles you encounter in life...

Related Information

- Calcium
  If you don’t have enough calcium in your diet, your bones will eventually become weak and brittle...

- Footwear for healthy feet
  Wearing shoes that fit properly and support your feet is vital to avoid sore feet and to prevent or alleviate many common foot problems...

- Tendonitis
  Most cases of tendonitis recover completely, but severe untreated tendonitis can lead to rupture of the tendon...

- Back pain - disc problems
  Most disc problems resolve without specific treatment...

- Foot odour - causes and cures
  Even the most fastidiously clean people can suffer from foot odour...

Related information on other websites

- Australian Physiotherapy Association
- BBC Health
- Precinct Physiotherapy South Australia
- The Cleveland Clinic
- Which posture are you?

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