

Posture Tips for Neck and Upper Back

Are you tired of that shoulder and neck tension? Maybe getting too many headaches? Chiropractic treatment will usually provide relief, but sustaining that relief usually requires avoiding the postural stress that started the problem.

Or maybe you have recently suffered a trauma that caused strain or sprain to the neck and upper back joints and muscles. For the best and quickest healing you may need to consult your chiropractor for treatment and recommendations on exercise and cold or heat therapy. But knowing how to avoid postural stressors is also necessary for healing.

Why is good posture important? Posture simply means your position in space. Certain postures stress your joints (including the discs of your neck and lower back) and cause your muscles to work more than necessary. We call these *poor postures* because they are putting unnecessary wear and tear on your joints and using unnecessary energy for muscle contraction. Consequently, poor postures can create a number of painful conditions, including neck pain, headaches, back pain, nerve entrapments, and disc problems.

Good postures are those positions that do not place unnecessary stress on joints and do not create unnecessary work for your muscles. With good posture you may look taller and more alert, but the real benefits are less wear and tear on your body, less pain, and more energy!

Keep your head over your shoulders – it's really that simple, but there are many applications to this short statement. Though your neck allows you to move your head in all directions for short periods of time, holding your head out of a neutral and balanced position causes problems. You need not be concerned about looking down to tie your shoe, but you don't want to hang your head to read a book.

Think of your head as a bowling ball. It's relatively easy to hold a bowling ball with your forearm straight up and down and with the ball resting in your palm. In this position neither the muscles on the front nor the muscles on the back of your forearm are working very hard. They are really just balancing the ball. Balancing your head over your shoulders is good posture because minimal effort is needed to maintain that position.

Your neck supports the weight of your head with three structures. On the front is the disc and on the back are two joints. Picture this as a three-legged tripod, each leg supporting about 1/3 of the weight. Considering that the adult head weighs 6-8 lbs., this is no small task.

When you bend your arm or wrist forward so that the ball is no longer balanced over your arm, it takes much more effort to hold the ball in the air. The same is true when your head hangs forward or to the side. The muscles on the back or side of your neck have to work harder to keep your head from falling forward or to a side. The weight of your head shifts to the disc as your head moves forward and to one of the joints as your head bends to a side. Though these "legs" are well equipped to handle 1/3 of the weight, doubling or tripling their workload causes premature wear and tear and sometimes failure. Wear and tear on joints is called arthritis.

Remember that your neck and low back are two ends of the same structure. Positioning one in a stressful position will cause stress to the other. Keeping the lower back straight to slightly forward allows for proper neck and upper back posture. For more on avoiding lower back postural stress, download *Posture Tips for the Low Back* at www.ElmenhurstChiro.com under the Health Tips tab.

Posture Tips for Neck and Upper Back

To Remember

- KEEP YOUR CHEST UP, which encourages your low back to assume a good posture, allows your shoulders to fall back in place, and allows your head to move over your shoulders.
- With your jaw parallel to the floor, push your head back (do not tip) as far as possible and then relax.
- DO NOT pull your shoulder back. Rather, with your chest up let your shoulders fall back in place.

Reading

- Start by ensuring you have good lower back support and then ensure your head is balanced over your shoulders.
- It is necessary to support your arms and book at a level that does not require your head to tip down. Sitting at a table, using a book stand, or stacking pillows on your lap may provide the needed support.
- Lying on your back with your head tipped up is not allowed! Lying on your stomach propped up on your elbows will work for short periods.

Computer work

- Position the monitor directly in front of you and at a height that does not require your head to tip down.
- If arm rests are available, adjust to rest your elbows where they naturally fall when holding your chest up. Arm rests that are too low will cause you to hunch forward.
- The angle between your upper arm and forearm should be 90⁰ or less. Angles greater than 90⁰ may cause problems at your wrists and forearms.

Telephones

- DO NOT tip your head to the side while cradling the phone between your head and shoulder.
- If you need to free your hands, use a headset. Nearly all new phones are headset compatible, and headsets are inexpensive.

Sleeping

- DO NOT SLEEP ON YOUR STOMACH. Holding your head in a turned position is a great stressor to your neck.
- You mold your posture when you hold your posture... and you hold your posture more with sleeping than with any other activity. When lying you need to maintain the head-over-your-shoulder posture just as if you were upright.
- With side sleeping there is more of a gap between your neck and bed than between your head and bed, so more support under your neck is necessary. You need to fill these gaps so that both your neck and head are supported and your head is neither propped high nor hanging low. Avoid tucking your chin or turning your head.
- With back sleeping you need support under your neck, but your head can lie flat on the bed. If using a pillow under your head and neck, the bulk should be under the lower part of your neck. Guard against having your head propped and tipped forward.

Additional copies of this advise may be downloaded at www.ElmenhurstChiro.com under Health Tips.



903 Howard Walla Walla WA 99362 www.ElmenhurstChiro.com 509.525.4160