

Posture Tips for **Low Back**

Is your back talking to you more every year? Does the aching limit how long you sit, how long you walk, or keep you from the activities you enjoy? Has the pain now moved into your legs? Chiropractic treatment may provide relief, but sustaining that relief usually requires avoiding the postural stress that may have started the problem.

Or maybe you have recently injured the joints and muscles of your back. For the best and quickest healing you may need to treat with your chiropractor, but knowing how to avoid postural stressors can influence both the quality and speed of 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!

When standing, **keep you head over your shoulders and your shoulders over your hips**. When sitting, **keep your low back straight to curved slightly forward**. It's really that simple, but there are many applications to these short statements. Though your back allows you to move your trunk in all directions for short periods of time, repetitively moving or holding your trunk out of a neutral and balanced position creates postural stress.

The weight of your upper body is supported by the spine of your low back. Think of the spine as a three-legged tripod. The front leg is the disc and the back legs are two joints. When the spine is straight to slightly curved forward (when using a lumbar roll or pushing your stomach forward), each leg supports about 1/3 of the weight. As your upper body weight shifts forward the weight is transferred to the front leg of the tripod (the disc). When you stretch backward the weight shifts to the two back legs of the tripod (the posterior joints).

When your upper body weight is not carried evenly over the tripod, the leg or legs carrying more weight may become irritated, will wear faster, and chronic tension will develop in certain muscles. This is poor posture and leads to arthritis, several pain syndromes, and sometimes failure (blown disc).

It may take years of wear and tear for the discs, joints, and muscles to become worn and painful. Consequently, our bodies can withstand years of postural abuse without pain. Because young people usually do not have pain as a motivator, convincing them to use good posture can be difficult. But attending to posture early in life will give you less aching later in life!

Remember that your neck and low back are two ends of the same structure. Positioning one in a stressful position will strain the other. Keeping your head over your shoulders reduces low back postural stress. For more on avoiding neck and upper back postural stress, download *Posture Tips for the Neck and Upper Back* at www.ElmenhurstChiro.com under the Health Tips tab.

To Remember

- KEEP YOUR CHEST UP, which allows your low back to assume a straight to slightly curved posture, allows your shoulders to fall back in place, and allows your head to balance over your shoulders.
- When your task requires bending or lifting in awkward positions, contracting your abdominal (stomach) muscles and gluteal (behind) muscles will help to brace your back.

Standing / Working over a counter

- AVOID ROUNDING YOUR BACK TO LOWER YOURSELF. Choose a work surface with a height that doesn't require you to round or bend your back. If your work surface is too low try different ways to lower yourself: sit on a stool or chair, stand with your feet spread apart, or bend your knees and pivot at your hips (not your back).
- Having your project (and hands) close to your body requires you to look down, which leads to a rounded posture. Pushing your project further away from your body reduces this risk.

Lifting

- Align your body with the object to be lifted.
- Bend at your knees and hips when lowering and your body. Avoid bending your back. Avoid twisting your trunk when grasping the object.
- Once you have grasped the object, if bending forward from the hips (not back) then resume an upright posture before rising. RISE WITH YOUR LEGS, NOT YOUR BACK.
- Keep the object to be lifted as close to your body as possible.
- When too heavy or awkward, get help!

Sitting

- WITH SITTING ENSURE THAT YOUR LOW BACK IS STRAIGHT TO SLIGHTLY CURVED FORWARD. Do not let your back bow backward. Tilting your seat pan forward or using a seat wedge allows your pelvis to roll forward and encourages your low back to curve forward. When a lumbar roll is used the additional support needs to be centered just above your belt line, not down at the level of your pelvis. Your pelvis should be firmly contacting the back of the chair.
- If your knees are higher than your hips, your back will tend to bow backward. KEEP YOUR KNEES EVEN WITH OR BELOW THE LEVEL OF YOUR HIPS. If necessary, fold your lower legs under your chair or extend them in front of you. Having your legs fully straightened when sitting will tend to bow your back backward. Maintain some bend in your knees.

Sleeping (see also *Posture Tips for the Neck and Upper Back* at www.ElmenhurstChiro.com)

- 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 lying on your back support is needed 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. DO NOT SLEEP ON YOUR STOMACH.

Exercising / Yard work / House work

- Maintain the straight back posture as much as possible. To lower yourself bend at your knees and hips, not your back.
- With raking, shoveling, sweeping and vacuuming keep your back straight. Bend and rise up with your legs. Step as far forward as you like but REACH ONLY AS FAR AS YOUR ARMS WILL ALLOW WITHOUT TWISTING OR BENDING YOUR TRUNK.
- With working near the ground (weeding, dusting, etc.) squat or lower to your knees, but do not bend over with straight legs. Working on all fours is a good position for your back, but be cautious not to over reach and cause twisting in your back.

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



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