

## What's all this about **POSTURE**

Are you tired of shoulder and neck tension? Maybe getting too many headaches? Is your back talking to you more every year? Does the aching keep you from the activities you enjoy? Or maybe you have recently suffered a trauma that caused strain or sprain injuries. For the best and quickest healing you may need to consult a doctor.

But whether your discomfort is from a trauma or not, how you hold your body and perform various activities of daily living (like sitting, gardening, reading, sleeping) can highly influence muscle tension and joint irritation. Balanced posture and proper performance of daily activities significantly improve the time and quality of healing and reduces the probability of the problem returning.

Posturers are *good* when there is no unnecessary stress on joints or 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!

### **Think MUSCLE BALANCE**

When balanced, your center of mass line runs from your head through your shoulders and hips to your ankles, and very little muscle energy is used to keep you upright. When your body shifts out of balance, so does your center of mass line, and muscles have to work harder to keep you upright.

It's relatively easy to hold a bowling ball with your forearm straight up and down and 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. Think of your head as the bowling ball balanced over your shoulders. The chest serves as the platform to balance your head, so keeping your chest up is necessary to balance your head.

Just as your neck muscles are not overworking when your head is balanced, your low back muscles are not overworking when your lumbar spine is curved slightly forward, as with rolling your hips forward and using a lumbar pillow.

### **Think SPINE BALANCE**

The weight of your head is supported by the cervical spine and the weight of your entire upper body is supported by the spine of your low back. The spine is like a three-legged tripod. The vertebral body and disc represent the front leg, and spinal joints on either side of the vertebral column represent the back two legs. When the cervical and lumbar spine are slightly curved forward each leg supports about 1/3 of the weight.

As your head moves forward and your low back rounds backward, the bulk of the weight shifts to the front leg of the tripod. 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.

### **TOTAL BALANCE = GOOD POSTURE**

Balancing your head over your shoulders and keeping your low back slightly curved forward is good posture because minimal muscle effort is needed and minimal stress is placed on the disc and joints of your spine. Such a balanced posture is also called **NEUTRAL** posture.

### **For starters**

It's important to keep in mind that posture is *most important when holding still*. We are made to move in all different ways, but holding those "out of balanced" postures for extended periods creates problems. And *you mold your posture how you hold your posture*. Maintaining a neutral posture is important even when lying down.

It's also important to realize that, though we refer to different regions, *our bodies work as one unit*. When thinking about posture, you cannot isolate just your head or just your low back. Rounding your low back causes a forward head and a forward head and chest rounds the low back.

### **When standing or walking**

- **KEEP YOUR CHEST UP**, which encourages your low back to assume a good posture and allows your head to balance over your shoulders.
- **LET YOUR SHOULDERS DOWN**, but don't hold them back. When your chest is up, they will fall where they need to be.
- **KEEP YOUR HEAD BALANCED**. With your jaw parallel to the floor, push your head back as far as possible and then relax.

### **When Sitting**

- **ROLL YOUR PELVIS FORWARD**, until your chest is up. **DON'T** sit on a wallet or any other bulky item!
- Use a **LUMBAR SUPPORT PILLOW** whenever possible. Your pelvis should be firmly contacting the back of the chair. The support needs to be centered at or just above your belt line.
- If you have no back support, focus on keeping the pelvis rolled forward. If you have an adjustable chair, tilting your seat pan forward or using a seat wedge allows your pelvis to roll forward and encourages your low back to curve forward.
- **KEEP YOUR KNEES EVEN WITH OR BELOW THE LEVEL OF YOUR HIPS**. If your knees are higher than your hips, your back will tend to bow backward. 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 round your low back. Maintaining some bend in your knees helps prevent this.
- **DON'T** hold **SHIFTED** (as with leaning on an armrest) or **TWISTED** (as with visiting with someone beside you)!

### **When lying**

- **DO NOT SLEEP ON YOUR STOMACH**. Holding your head in a turned position is a great stressor to your neck and molds the necessary forward curve **OUT** of your cervical spine.
- When lying you need to maintain the head-over-your-shoulder posture just as if you were upright.
- With **BACK LYING** ensure support under your low neck, but your head can lie flat on the bed. Guard against having your head propped and tipped forward. If you are accustomed to have your head propped, work on reducing the support under your head and increasing support under your low neck.
- With **SIDE LYING** 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. Keep your trunk straight avoiding the fetal round. Having a pillow in front to support your upper arm may help to avoid your upper body rolling forward. Your legs can be straight or bent at the knees, but keep your knees together to avoid twisting your trunk. Using a pillow between your knees may help you accomplish this.

**Postures are habits, and changing habits takes both determination and strategies. THINKING about the best way to hold your body and perform tasks is the first step. But when you think of the anything else you will likely revert to your habitual posture. Strategies such as using timers to check in (e.g. set for 10-20 minutes and see if you are maintaining your intended posture), putting lumbar pillows wherever you sit, telling those around you to watch and remind you, etc., all greatly help to form new postural habits.**

**FINALLY – Good posture is comfortable! If you are not comfortable something is wrong! We are not meant to hold still for extended periods, so most often you just need to move. Otherwise, difficulty being comfortable in good posture suggests something else is not right and a visit to your doctor is indicated.**

Additional copies of this advise and the companion handout **Proper Performance of ACTIVITIES OF DAILYLIVING** may be downloaded at [www.ElmenhurstChiro.com](http://www.ElmenhurstChiro.com) under Health Tips.

