

Everything in its place...



And a place for everything.



www.backcare.org.uk
Telephone: 020 8977 5474

Registered Charity No. 256751

Posture

Your posture can affect the health of your back, and therefore it is important to understand what good posture is and how to maintain it. Posture is not just how you sit or stand still, but how you move and use your body in all of your activities. The spine, in conjunction with the head, is the main structure, which determines posture and how you use your body. When people think of their back, they usually mean the part from their shoulder to their waist, but it is more meaningful to think of the spine. The spine extends from the level of your earlobe to the level of your hip joint, not the hipbone.

Good posture and movement patterns can help prevent back problems from occurring. Poor posture and co-ordination put more strain on the muscles and joints of your spine, and other parts of the body, which could result in on-going discomfort or even pain. Poor use of your body puts you at a greater risk of injuring your spine more seriously.

If you have a bad back, good posture and efficient movement are still important. Moving and holding yourself well puts less strain on your spine, minimises the risk of further acute episodes, and allows recovery. Back problems may cause us to move badly as we try to avoid the pain, and pain makes us very tense in our muscles, all of which can increase the pain and the risk of further problems. Back pain, particularly if long term and recurring, is often associated with depression. Sometimes this is pre-existing, or it may be caused or made worse by the frustrations and insomnia caused by back pain. Depressed individuals often have a characteristic “drooping”

posture, which in turn can worsen the back pain. Treating the depression can be valuable for reducing symptoms of back pain.

Good posture is not just about alignment, but also about the quality of muscle tone. It is relaxed but at the same time strong, neither the rigid pose of the sergeant major, nor the overly relaxed pose of the weak and floppy person. In poor posture, there will be some muscles which are tense and overworking, and others which are weak and under working and overstretched. This muscle imbalance can pull the spine out of its natural, healthy alignment. There are some general categories of poor posture or alignment, and within these we all have our own individual style of posture and movement. Faced with a more challenging activity, such as lifting a heavy object, or when we are under emotional stress or very fatigued, our individual style of misuse may intensify, and put us at even greater risk.

Ideally, we maintain the healthy alignment of the head and spine, and a balanced muscle tone in all our activities. These are some of the key things to look at:

Alignment of the head and upper spine



Good alignment of head, neck and upper spine



Poor alignment



Figure 3

Standing

Figure 3 shows a correct standing position

Notice how a plum line would fall from the earlobe through the middle of the shoulder, hip, knee and just in front of the ankle.

Figures 4 and 5 show two common styles of poor standing posture



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6

Figure 6: habitually standing on one leg throws the spine into a sideways curvature. Notice how this makes the shoulders and hips uneven.

Sitting

Slumping is not good for the spine, but neither is sitting up too straight. Figures 7 and 9 show good posture while figure 8 shows a typical sitting slump.

The chair you sit on is as important as your bed (see the *Back in Bed* booklet) and you may spend more time sitting than sleeping! Most of us are now aware of the importance of supportive office and work chairs (figure 9). But the sofa or easy chair at home is just as important, and many of these are too soft, too deep, too low, and with the backrest angled back too much. Figure 10 demonstrates all these problems; notice particularly the head, neck and shoulders. A backrest angled too far back is also a problem in the office chair where it will encourage the user to hunch their head and neck forward.

Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10



Figure 11



Figure 11 shows someone trying too hard to sit up properly and with an exaggerated S shape – also poor posture.

You should not spend long periods sitting – no matter how good your posture! It is a good idea to stand up and move around at intervals.

Figure 12



Bending

The spine is a very flexible structure, but using this flexibility inappropriately may put us at risk of strain and injury.

The man in figure 12 is bending from the upper spine and creating strain. In figure 13, he has raised his work surface and is standing upright – an ergonomic solution to the problem. See *Back Care at Work, An Ergonomic Guide to Manual Handling*.

Figure 13



When lifting a heavy object, it is important to keep the spine vertical. Figure 14 shows correct lifting technique. In figure 15 the woman is bending from the waist, a very dangerous procedure when lifting something heavy.

Most of the bending we do does not involve lifting heavy weights. Figure 16 shows poor bending from the waist – still risky even though little weight is involved.

Figure 14



Figure 15



Figure 16

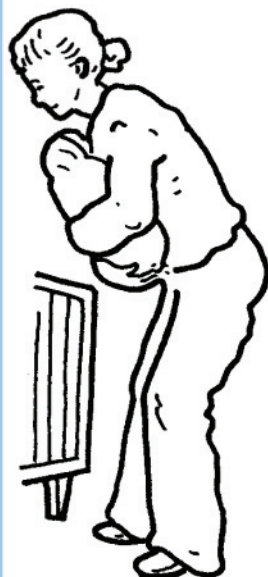


The usual advice is to bend your knees to save your back. The woman in figure 17 is bending her knees but is in danger of straining her knees if she continually over-bends them like this. She needs to stand closer and bend her hips as well as her knees, as in figure 18.

Figure 17



Figure 18





Information sheets made available by BackCare are provided for information only and should not be considered as medical recommendations or advice. Medical information is often controversial and continually changing. BackCare is not responsible for errors or omissions in the information. Some of the information may come from outside of the UK. This means, for example, that some of the drug names may be different, and the sources of help quoted are not available in the UK. Please consult your GP or Specialist to discuss any specific concerns or if you are considering changing treatment in any way eg adding dietary supplements or different exercise routines.

© BackCare2022 / Registered as the National Back Pain Association charity no 256751.