

The Straight Talk on Poor Posture: How to Improve Your Stance

Written by Penny Bowen, M.D.

We grew up being told the importance to sit up straight, keep our shoulders back and avoid slouching. For some, this is where the association began that good posture is a chore. But where our elders may have been motivating us to look collected and poised, did you know posture is more than just looking confident? It has a significant impact on our overall health and wellbeing.

The basis of good posture is placing the spine in the correct alignment for optimal weight distribution to the joints. In the case that one side is favored over the other, the body overcompensates and bone spurs can form, increasing pain and limiting mobility while decreasing surrounding muscles that offer strength and support. Uneven weight distribution on the spine can also lead to loss in disc height, cartilage, neck and core muscles, which can further degeneration.

Although, bad posture can be a real pain in the neck, it can affect more than just mobility. Digestion and breathing can also be impaired as rounded shoulders push weight down on the organs that control those functions. It can also impact our happiness because studies have shown bad posture is linked to depression and increased stressed.

Unfortunately, our day-to-day lives can get in the way of healthy posture. Between work, the daily commute and household chores, our spines try to keep balance in our chaotic lives. What may seem harmless in a single moment over time, these habits over time can cause significant wear and tear on us.

The following daily activities are the biggest offenders when it comes to bad posture:

Sitting at your desk: Sitting is one of the leading causes of poor posture because the human body is not designed to attend meetings and stare at computer screens all day. The spine feels the strain of this unnatural practice as we cross our legs, hunch over desks, shift to one side and slouch in chairs. What may be comfortable for a short period of time can have a lasting impact on the spine.

Driving: The daily commute can be a pain for your posture. It is an inevitable part of the day, but the hours spent driving can also lead to uneven weight distribution. Since everyone has a preferred position while driving, whether it is leaning to one side, steering with one hand or slouching, the hours sitting in traffic can contribute to habits that are difficult to shake outside of the car.

Texting: Many cannot make it through the day without checking a cell phone multiple times. Over time, this repetitive habit can take a big toll on spine alignment, causing neck and shoulder pain.

Carrying your purse: For women who carry more than just a few odds and ends, a purse's weight can be a big strain on posture, especially for women who prefer to carry their bag on the same side every time.

Housework: Chores may not be a fun way to spend the day, but neither is constant pain that can come from leaning over to do the dishes, sweep and mop the floors and any heavy lifting.

Although many of these activities are unavoidable, there are ways to correct a misaligned spine. A strong core is the key to good posture, and workouts that target this area can help reverse the effect. Sitting properly can also help maintain good posture. While sitting, be sure to keep feet on the ground with a small gap between the edge of the chair and knees, which should be hip-width apart. Keep the shoulders relaxed and arms parallel to the ground. Also try to get up frequently for short intervals to avoid remaining seated for long periods of time.

But perhaps one of the biggest ways to correct poor posture is self-awareness. Create checkpoints in your day and remind yourself to practice straight posture whenever possible.

The idea of correcting poor posture can seem daunting, as it is typically many years in the making of a bad habit, but these little practices can make a big difference to keeping a happy spine, happy muscles, happy body and a happy you.

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