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Source: Candis (Main)
Date: 01 July 2017
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Reach: 105796
Size: 1172cm2
Value: 27917.04

Yellow News...



MAKING A STAND

There's growing evidence that slumping and slouching not only makes you look bad, it could also harm your health and your happiness. LEAH HARDY gives the heads up on how bad posture can affect your life – and how to fix it

Most of us have been told 'Stop slouching!', or 'Stand up straight!' by our parents or teachers at some point. Irritating as their advice may have been at the time, it seems that they were on to something. "Good posture," declares physiotherapist Sammy Margo, "is critical for health."

A 2015 study published in *The Lancet* found that musculoskeletal disorders – mostly neck and back pain – are the biggest cause

of sick leave in the UK. An estimated three million people say they are unable to work due to back pain, according to research from Nuffield Health.

You might not be surprised to see spinal issues blamed on our posture, but that's not the whole story. Experts now suggest poor posture is linked to a host of seemingly unrelated health issues, from heartburn to depression.

So what's the problem with our posture, and is it time to

stand up for ourselves? Most of us recognise good posture when we see it in a ballerina, or athlete, for example. The shoulders are back and down, the chest open, the head poised and the body upright and moving freely and gracefully. However, none of us are born with good posture. Newborn babies have spines that are curled, prawn-like, into a C shape. This is called the 'primary curve'. After a few months, as the baby starts to lift its head to



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look around, this strengthens the muscles of the neck, which develops the inward curve from the top of the back to the base of the skull, something called the cervical curve. It's not until a baby is between a year and 18 months old and they are walking, that they fully develop the curve at the lower, or lumbar, spine, creating the elongated 'S' shape of a healthy back.

Maintaining these curves is essential to activating normal muscle function, explains Margo.

"Our posture depends on the structure and health of our skeleton, how strong our muscles are, how flexible they are, and on our daily habits," she says. "Strong muscles support our bones, and allow us to be upright without feeling tired. Flexible muscles, ligaments and joints allow us to move freely. Posture is affected by the way we move, injuries or age-related changes in the joints, and even our mood.

Instead of thinking of one ideal posture, it's better to think of having a series of healthy postures as we move. We call this 'dynamic posture' and it's every bit as important as how we stand and sit."

Yet everywhere we look we see people shuffling along and suffering from aches and pains. So what goes wrong?

"Movement and being fit is essential to good posture," says

Margo, "yet many of us spend hours shackled to our desks by day, then slumped on sofas in the evening. Physiotherapists used to mainly treat manual workers damaged by heavy lifting, now most of the patients we see are office workers. Today, around eight in ten of us will suffer from back pain, up from six out of ten just 30 years ago. I predict that unless we change our ways and start to get moving, this figure

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could easily become ten out of ten in the near future."

Orthopaedic surgeon Ian McDermott agrees. He says, "Poor posture has a huge negative effect. For example, compressing the spine by slumping can squeeze discs causing back pain, neck pain and headaches."

Technology also plays a role in harming our posture and thus our health. A recent study found we spend an average of 12 hours

a day looking at screens, including five hours at computers, and at least an hour looking at our phones.

As we peer down at the screen, we tend to poke our heads forward, flattening our cervical curve and rounding our upper back. This position has been dubbed the 'iPosture' and studies show it can cause the stiffness and pain known as 'text neck'.

Margo says, "When we lean forward 60 degrees, the stress on our necks is increased by approximately 60 pounds. Eventually, in conjunction with a sedentary lifestyle, this stress could lead to chronic pain, numbness in the arms and hands, improper breathing and pinched nerves."

When we sit at a desk, especially if using a laptop, we can end up with our spines hunched in a C shape, and our neck kinked backwards to look at the screen. "This can also affect the nerves in the neck, which can give you a headache," adds Margo.

Jo Fleming, chartered physiotherapist and director of Rebalance Pilates in Manchester, says, "This posture weakens back muscles, while sitting causes the hip flexors – the muscles where the thigh meets the hip – to tighten and our buttock muscles to become weak. Together this pulls the torso forwards so you start to ➤



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look like the 'elderly crossing' road sign." It may even affect our blood pressure. In 2007, researchers at the University of Leeds found that neck muscles send signals to a part of the brainstem that plays a critical role in regulating heart rate and blood pressure. Neuroscientist Dr Ian Edwards said the finding could explain why blood pressure and heart rates sometimes change when neck muscles are injured, for example, in people with whiplash. Similarly, it is possible that hours spent hunched over a computer may raise blood pressure. In 2015, Dr Edwards published research showing that neck muscles also influence breathing. "The pathway exists for bad posture to have negative effects," he said.

Interestingly, "Posture can be significant when living with a lung condition," adds Sue Hart, medical adviser for the British Lung Foundation. "Bending down reduces lung capacity and results in increased breathlessness. Sitting upright enables the chest to expand a lot more, allowing more air to enter and therefore makes breathing easier. Even an otherwise healthy person who is suffering with flu or chest infections will see their breathing improved just by sitting up straight, and breathing in through the

sleeping properly. In 2015, a researcher at Walden University in the US found a posture-improving programme called Straighten Up "reduced night time sleep interruptions" in asthma patients. This, they said, "could be an additional tool to manage their asthma and reduce the known impacts of sleep deprivation including, but not limited to, accidents, memory loss and heart disease."

Some experts now believe poor posture can have a role in stress incontinence and other bladder problems too – a problem that affects nearly 10 million women in the UK. In a 2008 Australian study, physiotherapists found that women who sat upright – with the spine adopting its natural curve at the bottom – were less likely to suffer from embarrassing leaks when coughing or laughing. Tests showed this posture activated the abdominal and pelvic floor muscles, which support the bladder.

Even our digestion can be improved by straightening ourselves out. According to specialists at Reflux UK, acid reflux or heartburn affects up to one in five people. Untreated reflux can increase the risk of oesophageal cancer, but changing your posture may help.

Consultant surgeon Nick Boyle, at the Reflux UK group

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nose and out through the mouth," she explains.

Some researchers have found people with asthma tend to stand and sit with their head poked forward and their shoulders hunched. Muscle tension caused by this poor posture may be why asthma is linked to low back pain, headaches and migraines. Asthma often worsens at night, causing coughing fits, and preventing sufferers from



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of specialists, says, "Millions of people experience some kind of reflux symptom every week. These commonly include heartburn and regurgitation, but also persistent coughs, sore throat, the sensation of a lump in the throat as well as throat clearing and changes in the voice. In some people, even asthma may be caused by reflux.

Reflux is caused by failure of the valve at the bottom of the oesophagus, not by too much acid. So an erect posture after

eating will help gravity keep stomach acid where it belongs."

What's fascinating is that for every health concern laid at the feet of poor posture, there are surprising benefits – some of them huge – in cultivating good posture. Perhaps the single most surprising benefit of good posture is how it affects mental health. A slew of studies show that holding your head high gives you confidence; lifting your shoulders lifts your mood and slouching makes you

grouchy. In one 2015 study in the journal *Health Psychology*, people told to sit upright 'reported higher self-esteem, better mood, and less fear compared to those who were slumped.' When people were put under stress by asking them to make a speech in front of a crowd, researchers discovered that good posture helped them feel less stressed and have better self-esteem, plus they were a lot less self-conscious. Meanwhile,

How's your posture?

Physiotherapist Sammy Margo explains how to check your posture right now by standing against a wall and doing the following...

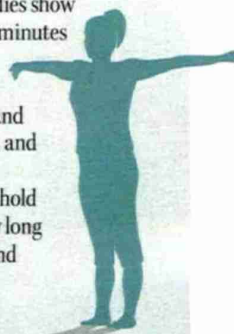
- Stand as straight as you can, and allow as much as possible of your body to touch the wall.
- Aim for heels, buttocks, shoulders and head to touch the wall, but don't strain or hurt yourself.
- Think of a cord attached to the top of your head pulling you upwards making you taller, but keep your chin parallel to the floor.
- Step away from the wall and try to hold yourself in that position.

Don't worry if you find this challenging at first explains Margo. It's not always easy to change our habits, as our bodies adapt to the positions we keep them in. She says, "I stand a lot, so if I were to sit for hours, I'd soon find my bottom hurting. However, if someone who usually sat down had to stand, their feet and back would become sore quite quickly."

Fortunately, good posture is in itself a kind of exercise, she says, "To stay upright you have to engage the postural muscles, a big muscle mass that includes the abdominals, calves and quadriceps – the more muscles

you can use the better." This is such an intense workout that studies show for many people, just ten minutes of sitting or standing properly upright can tire the muscles in the spine and abdomen that hold us up, and we start to lean forward.

"You may not be able to hold your new posture for very long at first, but keep trying and it will improve as you get stronger," says Margo.



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poor posture actually resulted in more stress.

A University of Auckland study, published in March in the *Journal of Behavior Therapy and Experimental Psychiatry*, found sitting up straight in a chair was directly linked to less tiredness. Participants who sat upright felt more confident and they stuck to difficult tasks for longer. They felt more alert

and enthusiastic, and had much higher self-esteem.

Osteopath Susannah Makram says many of her patients come to see her when they realise their hunched posture is making them look old. "Patients look after themselves, have great hair and dress well, but feel old because they are stooped. Once I've helped them to open up their chest and shoulders, they tell me

they don't just feel younger, but much more confident as well."

Bob Chatterjee, consultant orthopaedic surgeon at Harley Street Spine and spinal lead at The Royal Free Hospitals NHS Trust says, "People don't realise the effects of bad posture, or that it's possible to reverse it. But it is, and the benefits are huge."

So isn't it about time you stood up for yourself? ✨

9 great posture rules to follow

1 Don't sit at a desk for hours. Get up and walk about every 15-20 minutes, and do simple stretches at your desk to open up your chest and decompress your neck.

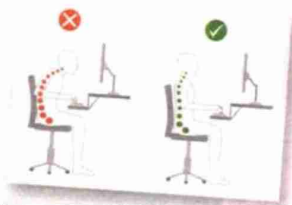
2 You might assume that standing desks are the answer. Not necessarily. "Being immobile, whether standing or sitting, is problematic," says Margo, and standing desks have been linked with back and foot pain. "The best solution might be an adjustable desk that you can both stand or sit at, so you can alternate between the two. Or simply spend less time sitting looking at a screen," she says. So think about whether you really need to check your Facebook page between jobs.



3 Put your phone away when walking. Lift your head and look up!

4 Put your computer screen on a stand so you don't have to crick your neck to look. Invest in a separate keyboard if necessary.

5 For a better sitting posture, push your bottom into the back of the chair, or use a Sitfit (an air-filled cushion you put on top of the seat) which will adjust your posture so you engage the ab muscles and pelvic floor.



6 Stand up once an hour and interlink your fingers behind your back – this helps the neck, back and shoulders.

7 Don't prop your phone between your chin and ear. Use a hands-free set.

8 Fitness is important for good posture. Yoga, tai-chi and Pilates are all good activities to help improve posture.

9 Wear supportive, well-fitting shoes. Orthopaedic surgeon Ian McDermott says, "Avoid unstructured boots and flat pumps as they tend to be poorly fitting and offer no support, which places huge strain on the legs and knees."