

GOOD POSTURE FOR A HEALTHY SPINE

A healthy spine has 3 natural curves designed to distribute the weight of our bodies evenly. There is a slight forward curve in the neck (cervical spine), a slight backward curve in the upper back (thoracic spine) and a slight forward curve in the lower back (lumbar spine). Good posture means keeping these three curves in balanced alignment. In this position the body is able to function at its strongest with the minimum stress placed on joints, intervertebral discs, ligaments and muscles.

When we maintain a good posture our bodies are in balance. On the other hand bad postural habits lead to the overload of muscles and increased strain on the spine itself, resulting in spinal subluxations, muscle spasm, pain and inflammation. Problems associated with bad posture include neck and shoulder tension, headaches, pain between the shoulder blades and lower back pain. Over time bad posture can lead to degenerative changes in the spine itself.

One of the most common forms of poor posture is sitting in a slouched position with rounded shoulders and the neck protruding forward, this results in a "C" shaped curve of the entire spine, reversing all the natural curves and putting a great deal of stress on the joints, discs, ligaments and muscles.

This is particularly common in teenagers today. Recent studies have shown an increase in neck and shoulder pain in teenagers, this can be linked to an increase in sedentary leisure activities. Activities such as computer games, play station and watching TV do not promote good posture as teens usually spend prolonged periods in slouched positions. This combined with a decrease in physical activity, many hours sitting at desks and heavy school bags leads to poor muscle strength and bad postural habits.

Strong and healthy muscles support the spine in the correct position reducing strain on the joints and preventing problems such as backache and development of more serious conditions like scoliosis or Scheuermann's disease. Training back and abdominal muscles with a good exercise program will help you maintain a healthy posture. Stretching on a regular basis helps to prevent the build up of tension in the muscles and maintain a healthy relaxed posture.

The good news is that bad posture is often just a habit, usually related to lifestyle and environment. Changing bad postural habits starts with an awareness of body position while sitting, standing, lying and walking. By examining your posture in the mirror you can become aware of your postural problems and start to change them.

Maintaining a good posture will not only prevent aches and pains but will also make you look and feel better.

Tips for teenagers for a healthy spine:

- Sit up straight, no slouching, this places strain on the spine and muscles.
- Place the straps of your school bag over both shoulders to avoid uneven stresses on the spine. Keep your bag as light as possible. Use an orthopaedically designed schoolbag.

- Get involved in sports and outdoor activities and limit the time spent with TV, play station and computer games. Having healthy strong muscles supports the spine and protects it from injuries.
- Take a break every 40 minutes while studying for exams, sitting in the same position for long periods of time causes tension to build up in the muscles.
- Sit at a desk while studying (not on your bed) to avoid bad posture.
- Don't sleep on your stomach as the twisting of your neck leads to joint and muscle problems.
- Get your spine checked by a health care professional. Some spinal conditions develop during adolescence, eg. scoliosis and Scheuermann's Disease. Early detection can lead to better management of the condition.
- Pain is a warning sign, so don't ignore it!