

Mom Was Right: Sitting Up Straight Is Good for You

By Rick Ansorge

When you were a slouchy teenager, your mother may have admonished you to sit up straight. It turns out that from a medical standpoint she was absolutely right. People with correct posture are less likely to suffer from a multitude of health woes, especially low back pain.

“From an evolutionary standpoint we’re supposed to walk with our heads up and look straight forward,” says Michael Gleiber, M.D., a Florida-based orthopedic spine surgeon.

Unfortunately, modern homo sapiens are rapidly evolving into a new species that might as well be called “homo slumpus.”

“More than half of folks in the United States suffer from bad posture,” Dr. Gleiber tells Health Radar.

Poor posture strains the discs, ligaments, and muscles in the neck and spine, impairing the circulation of vital nutrients.

Over time, this can lead to degenerative disc disease, chronic neck, shoulder, and back pain, and chronic fatigue.

Uncorrected poor posture — especially in combination with age-related conditions such as osteoarthritis and osteoporosis — can set you up for kyphosis. This is a condition associated with a forward-tilted head, downcast eyes, rounded shoulders, hunched back, and a shuffling, unsteady gait.

Millions of us have sedentary jobs that force us to spend long hours hunched over computer screens.

“We contort our bodies so we start to slouch, lean forward, and flex our necks,” says Dr. Gleiber. “Over time, those small biomechanical changes can cause a tremendous amount of stress on our healthy ligaments and discs. After a while, our bad posture becomes ingrained in our brain and becomes part of our muscle memory,” says Dr. Gleiber.

If you have a desk job, Dr.

Gleiber recommends a chair that’s between firm and medium-firm. “You don’t want to sit on something too soft,” he says. “If you sink into a cushion, you’re going to strain your lumbar area, and that’s going to make your posture worse.”

Avoid sitting for more than 20-30 minutes at a time without getting up and moving.

How You Roll

When patients ask about the best exercise for promoting posture, Dr. Gleiber’s answer is unequivocal: the shoulder roll.

Shoulder rolls can be performed anywhere, seated or standing. As you take a slow, deep breath, count to five seconds while raising your shoulders. Then slowly exhale and count to five seconds while lowering your shoulders. Finish the exercise by squeezing your shoulder blades together as if you were trying to squeeze a ball between them, and count for another five seconds.

Dr. Gleiber recommends performing 7-15 shoulder rolls at a time and working up to at least 40 shoulder rolls per day.

If you’re athletically inclined, and live near a lake or the ocean, try running on the sand. “It’s one of the best exercises for folks with bad spine problems because it uses more energy and engages more accessory muscles than running on a hard surface,” Dr. Gleiber says. “Since it’s a soft surface, it’s easier on backs and joints.”

Take the Tape Test

To determine if you have bad posture, Dr. Gleiber recommends taking the “tape test.”

Place a piece of masking tape vertically down the center of a full-length mirror. Then place a piece of masking tape horizontally from one side of the mirror to the other at about shoulder height. Add another horizontal piece around the pelvic level. Stand in front of the mirror, as you would do normally, placing yourself in the center and look at yourself.

Are you centered? Does your head tilt to one side? Is one hip higher? Is one shoulder higher? If you answered “yes” to any of the questions, your posture needs improvement.