



GETTING IT STRAIGHT

Improve Your Posture for Better Health

Sit up straight! This common request may have been how you first heard about posture, the way you hold your body. Posture isn't just about how you look. How you position yourself can help or hurt your health over your lifetime.

"Posture is not only about how well you sit, but how well you move and go about your daily life," says Dr. George Salem, an NIH-funded researcher at the University of Southern California who studies how movement affects health and quality of life.

How you hold yourself when you're not moving—such as when you're sitting, standing, or sleeping—is called static posture. Dynamic posture is how you position your body while you're moving, like walking or bending over to pick something up. "It's important to consider both static and dynamic components of posture," Salem says.

Posture can be affected by many things: your age, the situations you find yourself in, and your daily choices.

For instance, children may have to adjust to carry heavy backpacks to school. Pregnant women move differently to accommodate growing babies.

Your posture involves your musculoskeletal system. This includes your bones, muscles, joints, and other tissues that connect the parts of your body together. It's what provides form, support, stability, and movement to your body.

How you hold yourself can either align or misalign your musculoskeletal system. Throughout life, this system must adapt to the type of work you do, the hobbies you enjoy, how you use electronic devices, injuries, and even the kind of shoes you wear.

You may think that sitting with slumped shoulders or bending at your back instead of your knees sometimes won't hurt you. But small changes in how you hold yourself and move can add up over a lifetime.

Years of slouching wears away at your spine to make it more fragile and prone to injury. Holding your body and moving in unhealthy ways often leads to neck, shoulder, and back pain. In any 3-month period, about 1 in 4 adults in the U.S. has at least 1 day of back pain.

Poor posture can also decrease your flexibility, how well your joints move, and your balance. It can impact your ability to do things for yourself and increase your risk for falls. Slumped posture can even make it more difficult to digest the food you eat and breathe comfortably.

An extremely hunched posture, or hyperkyphosis, affects up to two-thirds of senior women and half of senior men. This posture has been associated with back pain, weakness, and trouble breathing. It can also limit everyday activities, like brushing your hair and dressing yourself.

Salem and other researchers have been studying the possible health benefits of yoga, particularly for older

adults. Yoga is a mind and body practice that typically combines physical postures, breathing exercises, and meditation or relaxation. In one study, older adults with hyperkyphosis showed significant improvement and less rounded shoulders after a 6-month yoga program.

“If you spend a lot of time in front of a computer, make sure you have a good setup,” says NIH physical therapist Dr. Jesse Matsubara. “It’s important that your workstation fits you the best it can. You should also switch sitting positions often, take brief walks around the office, and gently stretch your muscles every so often to help relieve muscle tension.”

It’s important to work with a doctor to find the types of physical activity that can help you maintain your health and mobility. Talk to your health care providers if you feel pain, have an injury, or have had surgery. They can give you feedback on how you’re moving, help you avoid unhealthy movement patterns, and work with you to create a plan that’s best for you.

IMPROVE YOUR POSTURE

- » Be mindful of your posture during everyday activities, like watching television, washing dishes, or walking.
- » Take frequent breaks for stretching and moving your body in different ways.
- » Stay active.
- » Maintain a healthy weight.
- » Make sure work surfaces are at a comfortable height for you, whether you’re working in an office, doing a hobby, preparing dinner, or eating a meal.
- » Wear comfortable, low-heeled shoes.

