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SO HOW BAD IS MY POSTURE?
by Dr. Brian S. Seaman, DC, FCCSS(C), FICC

Stand up straight!

How many times did our parents say that?

How many times have you said this to your children or grandchildren?
Probably lots of times!

Posture is something that develops with time; it can be good or it can be bad. Many things can be affected by your posture. Even as a young child our posture changes as we start crawling, then standing, walking and running.

Sitting in classrooms for years and working at computers for hours on end, can adversely affect our posture as well. Poor posture can also be contributed to by a lack of strength of the postural muscles in our necks and backs.

Postural Muscle Weakness

This can be related to:

Inactivity.

Improper exercise technique.

Inappropriate exercise selection.

When we are younger, 'slouching' can be a problem; especially if you have a growth spurt or are quite tall. We all know people who are quite tall in junior high and high school who slouch. Sometimes their muscles would not keep up with their growth, and at other times, they were self conscious of their height. Unfortunately, if it is the latter, that can follow a young person into adulthood.

Other times, scoliosis may affect our posture. This is a lateral curvature of the spine. Through the teenage years, any curvatures should be monitored closely. Slight curvatures are generally not of concern. However if the curvature progresses to a significant degree, it can potentially cause compression of the heart and lungs due to a change in the shape of the ribcage. Thankfully, this degree of curvature is rare.

As parents and grandparents, there are a few hints on what to look for with your children through their teenage years:

Check for an unevenness of the hips or shoulders.

Tilting of the head to either side.

Pants, slacks or trousers sitting unlevel on the hips, or uneven leg lengths when hemming these articles of clothing.

These could be early signs of a scoliosis developing. If you notice any of these, please check with your health care professional. Depending upon the degree of scoliosis, it may be necessary to arrange for an x-ray to assess the degree of the curvature and also provide a baseline for future comparisons. A rapidly progressing scoliosis or curvature is of concern.

Mild curvatures are generally of no significant concern. Encouraging exercise and activity is a common approach although specific exercises provided by your health care professional may be indicated. As we 'mature' there is always the possibility of developing osteoarthritis and degenerative changes in our spine. Although uncommon, such changes, if advanced, can contribute to the development of a curvature or kypho-scoliosis secondary to degenerative changes. A kypho-scoliosis involves not only a lateral curvature but also a forward flexion or bending of the spine. This can occur in the lower back (lumbar) or in the mid/upper back (thoracic area). This can cause difficulties with your posture and daily activity level. Your health care professional can advise on what combination of treatment, exercises or therapy might be beneficial.

Back to posture –

Poor posture can be dealt with in a variety of ways:
Postural awareness.
Exercise.
Ergonomics.

Ergonomics involves modifying or changing your work area or computer station to reduce the strain on your body. This may include a well designed chair, adjustable chair, adding a keyboard tray or mouse tray, changing the position of your computer screen and using a headset for the phone. It may also involve re-organizing your desk drawers or files to make your work area more efficient.

Poor posture usually involves:

An anterior carriage or position of the head (chin juts forward).

Rounded shoulders.

'Sway back' which is an increased lumbar lordosis.

Some of the key exercises which can be beneficial include a posterior chin tuck, stretching the chest muscles, thoracic extension exercises, stretching the lumbar spinal muscles and strengthening the abdominals. Specifics as to these exercises and to ensure that proper form is being used, you should check with your health care professional.

Postural problems may also be contributed to by lower limb problems. As an example, pronation of the feet (flattening the arches) can cause an internal rotation of the shin (or tibia) which in turn increases the strain on your hips, as well as your lower back.

Although this is not postural in the sense we normally think about, poor foot posture can affect not only the foot mechanics but also your hips and lower back.

So how bad is it? The ideal posture line should run through your earlobe, tip of the shoulder, lateral hip, lateral knee and foot.

If your posture is not what it should be, it is time to take note of the changes you can make and talk to your health care professional.

So chin back, chest out, shoulders back and tummy in – yes – there is a reason we are told to do this when we are young!

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