

Basic Osteopathic Guidelines To Improve Posture

Why Posture Is So Important

Maintaining good posture is important in more ways than most people realise. It decreases tension on the neck and shoulders, which leads to less pain and a decreased likelihood of injury to the muscles and tendons in these areas. It also allows our organs to function well, which improves breathing, digestion and circulation.

Poor posture causes:

- constant tension in the muscles of the upper back.
- a build up of metabolic by-products and inflammation
- irritation and strain of the shoulders, upper back and neck joints
- tension headaches

The pain caused by these processes is one of the most common reasons for a patient to visit a therapist such as an osteopath.

Over time, poor posture leads to structural changes in the bones and joints. Our bodies always try to keep the eyes and ears level. In some people this requires a twist in their pelvis or ribs, others may find their neck is the area which twists to compensate.

These imbalances cause other problems such as:

- altered tooth and jaw position
- less space for the internal organs
- decreased efficiency of lymphatic drainage throughout the body

Given this, it is useful to learn how to improve your posture so you can avoid the pain associated with bad posture. Unfortunately, most people aren't aware they have poor posture, let alone know how to improve it.

The next few pages provide simple guidelines for recognising poor posture, tips for improving your posture, and simple exercises and stretches.

The Initial Stages Of Improving Posture

When a person is starting to improve their posture, it is very common for them to feel uncomfortable. The small stabilising muscles around the lower part of the spine, which haven't been used consistently, are weak and, like any muscle that is worked, they initially aren't able to maintain a contraction for longer than 15 minutes without pain.

It is very important at this stage to be realistic. Firstly, you need to be ready to increase the strength of the muscles. This takes time, can be frustrating, and will lead to some pain initially due to a build up of lactic acid. When this happens remember, if you were an athlete trying to improve your performance you would train your body and initially there would be aches and pains in the days afterwards. This is a normal part of increasing muscle strength and over time it will decrease.

It is not normal, however, to be in a significant amount of pain. This can occur due to imbalances in the body, which are leading to joint or muscle strain. If this is the case it is advisable to **consult a practitioner such as an osteopath.** Treatment can help to increase the range of motion of the joints, and improve the balance of the musculoskeletal system, which decreases the strain on the muscles and joints, allowing them to heal.

Secondly, you must **break the habit** of allowing yourself to have poor posture by being consciously aware of how you are sitting, standing or lifting. As with breaking any habit this can take some time, which may mean months of reminding yourself.

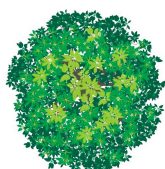
Basically the initial process of improving your posture will take some determination and hard work from you. Don't become despondent if **this takes 6-12 months.** Over time you will form new habits and increase your muscle strength and maintaining your posture will become something you aren't even consciously aware of.

Correct Posture

It is difficult to change something if you don't know what you are doing wrong! To be able to correct your posture to you must first know what normal posture is.

The spine has natural curves. In the lower back it should gently curve forward. It curves backward through the upper back and forward again through the neck.

Poor posture occurs when these curves are exaggerated or flattened, or if the hips and shoulders are twisted or being held up or down on one side.



Sitting Guidelines

In today's society, most individuals spend the majority of their day seated. Our relaxed culture doesn't demand we sit straight and there is a great number of people who have formed the habit of sitting poorly over many years and no longer have the muscle strength in the lower and mid back regions to maintain correct posture for any great length of time, even if they try to.

If you use your chair and desk correctly, however, there should be minimal muscle contraction needed. The guidelines which follow are not always applicable to everyone, but most patients find them useful as ways of taking the strain off their bodies while sitting.

1. If you are at a desk make sure your **elbows can comfortably rest on the desk**.

This should not raise your shoulders. If this is the case you will need a chair which can be raised higher.

If your chair has arm rests on it, this often means taking them off so your chair can sit closer to the desk.

2. Make sure your **feet can rest comfortably on the floor**.

If you are too short place something under your feet so that the weight of your legs isn't pulling on your back.

If you are very tall, your thighs aren't likely to be resting on the seat. It is very difficult to maintain the natural forward curve of your lower back in this instance. Consider placing chocks under the legs of your desk so you can raise your seat to an appropriate height.

3. The chair's **seat should not be too long for your thigh**. If it is, you won't be able to lean against the back-rest without slumping. This is a problem for short people. It is uncommon in desk chairs, with couches being the main offenders. If the base of the seat is too long for your thighs, consider placing a cushion behind your mid back and lower ribs to help you avoid slumping.
4. The **back-rest of your chair should be at approximately 110°**, not bolt upright at 90°.
5. The **back-rest should support lower rib area** of your back. If the back-rest is only small, it is often positioned too far down, supporting only the lower back. It needs to be raised so it also supports the mid back and lower rib regions.
6. Keep your **mouse and phone close** enough to you so that you don't have to lean over to reach them.

7. If you are looking at a computer screen or reading documents the top of them should be at **eye height**. This helps you avoid the temptation to look down.

Consider **increasing the size of the font** or icons on your screen so it's easy to read, also helping you avoid the temptation to slump forward.

8. If you do not have a back-rest, or are too tall for your work station, consider **sitting quite far forward on your chair, with your feet on the floor under your bottom**. This puts your knees below your hips and helps you more easily maintain a good, forward curve in you lower back.

Standing Guidelines

The most important thing to remember when standing for long periods of time is **not to exaggerate the curves of your back**. It is very easy to allow your chest to slump down and your hips to protrude forward, allowing and your lower back to strongly arch. Instead you should try to stand tall. This means turning on your core muscles.

Common mistakes people make whilst standing for long periods include **standing with their weight predominantly on one leg**, thrusting the other hip to the side. This leads to twisting and compression in the spine, and is fairly easy for people to correct. If you tend to stand this way try standing with your feet slightly further apart and remember to keep your shoulders in a natural line above your hips.

Another common mistake people make when asked to stand tall is to only think of pulling their shoulders back. This means that they only muscles they are using are those of the upper back and shoulders. These muscles are not the right type of fibres to maintain a contraction for a long period of time, and will be become constantly sore.

To maintain correct posture, the muscles which need to be switched on are those in the **lower back, mid back and the stomach**. The mid back region is the area of the back which is underneath the shoulder blades and above the lower back. It is the muscles in this region which are the most common for patients to exhibit weakness in. This makes it the most common region for patients to feel an ache in when they are increasing the strength of their postural muscles.

A Final Word

The steps outlined here are only generic, but many individuals find them very useful. The most common factors which stall a patients progress to better posture are not making a conscious effort to change their behaviour over the long term, or not seeking advice if you are struggling. It is useful to keep in mind that you may need some treatment to help realign your body. This makes it far easier to change your habits and can be provided by a practitioner such as an osteopath.

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