

Posture

Posture is the way we hold our bodies against gravity and maintaining a good posture involves training yourself to become aware of how you hold yourself in all activities as your posture is constantly changing as you move.

If you look around you, many of the people you see will have poor posture. Many of the aches and pains we experience are due to poor posture and by restricting the space your lungs and other vital organs have to work in it can even affect their function, making you feel unwell and inexplicably tired.

You will always notice those with good posture as they will invariably look poised, in control and healthy. Adopting good posture will make you feel better about yourself and improve your overall confidence because you'll *look* better as well.

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So why do most of us have poor posture?

As we move through life, many things contribute to the way we hold our bodies. These can be physical, such as injury, muscle tension, tiredness and pain or just plain bad habit. Our mental state also has a big influence. For example stress can cause us to tense up, as can anxiety while depression can cause us to slouch and lose interest in the way we look. All these can result in an alteration in the normal alignment of the body parts, particularly the spine and this will eventually lead to pain. Achieving a good posture can immediately make us look good, healthy and even thinner, but can also decrease those aches and pains. So it's important to increase your awareness and actively think about your posture at all times.

As stitchers, sitting for long periods can cause stiffness, particularly in the spine, hips, knees and ankles and also cause tightness and shortening of certain muscles and ligaments in these areas. If you have a tendency to slouch, this can restrict your breathing and put pressure on your vital organs too. Sitting for long periods can even make you feel more tired as a result of poor circulation and decreased oxygen getting to vital organs. Prolonged inactivity can be a factor in the formation of blood clots in the legs (DVTs) in the same way as when you take a long plane journey!

What can you do?

The good news is that it's in your power to change poor posture. Follow our guidelines on good posture in sitting, standing and lying (yes posture also matters when you're asleep!) and take regular breaks (about every 20 minutes) to gently stretch and do some gentle exercise. A physiotherapist can advise you on the best exercises for your specific needs. If you are able to get up and stretch your legs every 20 minutes, take a walk around the house. This will dissipate tension and boost your circulation, sending more oxygen to your brain to make you more alert. Take this opportunity to focus on a distant object as this will help to avoid eye strain, too.

If you feel you need more help then a physiotherapist will be able to give you exercises with your specific needs in mind and also be able to teach you how to strengthen your postural muscles and stretch to lengthen soft tissues and prevent joint stiffness.

Improving your posture will need perseverance, because the improved posture is bound to feel a little strange at first. It will all be worth it, though, as you will be rewarded with long-term physical benefits and it will make you feel really good about yourself.

Sitting posture

Choosing the right chair for your individual needs is a crucial factor in achieving good sitting posture. Don't stitch sitting on a low sofa as this will encourage you to slouch over your work and your knees will be higher than your hips, making it difficult to maintain a good posture and making it a struggle to stand up.

Tips for choosing the correct chair

1. Choose a firm seat which is long enough to support your whole thigh.
2. It should allow your feet to rest flat on the floor.
3. Ideally your hips should be very slightly higher than your knees, which also makes it easier to stand up.
4. It should support your back.

Good sitting posture

1. Sit with the base of your spine against the back of the chair.
2. Your weight should be evenly spread.
3. Your feet should be flat on the floor.
4. Your shoulders should be back - not rounded over your work.
5. You might find that placing a small rolled up towel in the curve of your lower back will help to maintain a good posture and give more support for your lower back.
6. Your arms and shoulders should be relaxed.

Dos

- Get up and stretch every 20 minutes.
- Seek advice from a Chartered Physiotherapist for appropriate exercises for your needs.
- If you suffer from neck pain, try supporting the weight of your arms with pillows and avoid looking down – try especially adapted frames and use a copy holder to hold your chart.
- Make sure lighting is good – where possible stitch in good natural light or use a daylight lamp if possible.
- Use a copy holder for your charts.

Don'ts

- Don't sit for prolonged periods.
- Don't cross your legs as this restricts circulation even more.
- If you're answering the phone, don't wedge it between your ear and shoulder.
- Don't stretch forward to pick something up from the floor, use a magnetic pickup stick to prevent overstretching (see our Products page).

Other points to watch

When you're standing from sitting move forward to the edge of the chair and then lean forward from the hips to bring your nose over your toes. Push up using your arms and legs to minimise strain on your back.

Tip to find your ideal sitting position

1. Sit on a stool or sideways on a chair and slouch gently as much as possible.
2. Next sit as upright as possible.
3. Relax slightly from this upright position to find your neutral spine position.

Sitting at your computer

1. Many of you will be spending time at your computer every day chatting to friends. The rules for correct sitting posture are the same and apply here too, with a few extra points to watch.
2. Place your screen so that your eyes are level with the top of the screen.
3. You should be able to read your screen comfortably, whilst sitting upright. Take extra care to tuck your chin as lifting your chin to look at your screen will result in neck pain.
4. As we mentioned above, your chair should support your lower back and you could use extra support by rolling up a small towel and placing this in the small of your back.
5. Adjust the height of your chair so that your forearms are supported on the desk, with your arms relaxed and elbows at right angles. This might mean you need a footrest for your feet to rest flat.
6. You should rest against the back of your chair. Do not lean forwards. If you have to lean forwards to read your screen, then move the screen toward you, (sounds very obvious, but everyone leans forward!)
7. If possible adjust the angle of your seat so that your hips are slightly higher than your knees.
8. Place your mouse within easy reach and hold it with your forearm and wrist straight. If you hold it at an angle this can cause pain in your neck, shoulder, elbow and wrist.

Standing posture

1. In your correct standing posture you should maintain the natural curves of your spine.
2. Your chin should be tucked in and shoulders blades back and down.
3. Your chest should be forward and as with sitting your spine should be in a neutral position.
4. Knees should be straight but not locked.
5. Again avoid standing for long periods.

Lying posture

Many people think the firmer the mattress the better, but this is not the case. A mattress that's too firm is as bad as one that's too soft. The ideal mattress should support your back but also mould into your natural curves, so that these are supported too.

1. Place your pillow under your head, but not under your shoulders, again to maintain a natural spinal position. One pillow should be enough for this. If you can't lie flat then remember to maintain a neutral spine. Try a foam wedge shape if necessary.
2. If you lie on your back then you may find a pillow under your knees helps to take the strain off your lower back.
3. If you prefer lying on your side then bend your knees slightly. Avoid bending your knees up to your chest.
4. Avoid sleeping on your front as this can cause back strain.

When standing up from lying, first roll onto your side, draw both knees up and swing your legs gently out one by one. Push up with your hands and arms. This minimises strain on your back and tummy muscles and uses your arm muscles instead.

All this advice may seem a bit daunting at first but if you persevere good posture will become second nature. And remember if you're finding it difficult you can chat to your friends at Stitchlinks who will all be trying it too!