

5 tips to improve your posture



Why is posture so important?

We are all at some point taught that having an upright posture is better than being slouched forward, but why? Your posture really shows how capable your body is of adapting to gravity. Our bodies are constantly adapting to external forces, for example cold temperatures or bacteria, yet none of such external forces is so constant as gravity. Unless you are an astronaut, you can't escape gravity.

So, when we are maintaining an upright posture we are adapting well to gravity, whereas being slouched forward is a sign that gravity is overcoming the adaptive capacity of your body. This doesn't come without consequences. When the center of gravity changes, many other changes occur in the body to make sure that we somehow stay up. Some muscles will contract, bones will deform, and joints lock up. All these responses are an effort of the body to compensate for the loss of its optimal posture.

It's not only physical

Your posture is not only affected by physical aspects, but is also influenced by your mood or the emotions that you experience. Have you ever seen a dog with a tail between his legs? Do you know what that means? Right, that he was scared. For us humans, an upright "open" posture generally means we are happy, confident, and relaxed. Being slouched forward, or having a "closed" posture, may mean that we are sad, anxious, or stressed. Studies have even shown how your posture may directly affect your mood and your ability to deal with emotions. This means that having a good posture may come with many pleasant "side effects."



What you can do about it

As chiropractors we often get asked how you can improve your posture so here we have 5 simple steps to do just that. Before we can improve any situation we have to know what is going on, so the first two steps are about creating awareness of your posture and your state of being. Then we deal with some common mistakes or myths about how to achieve an optimal posture. Ultimately we give you some practical tips and we show why chiropractic care is essential for creating your optimal posture.

Step 1.

Become aware of your breathing

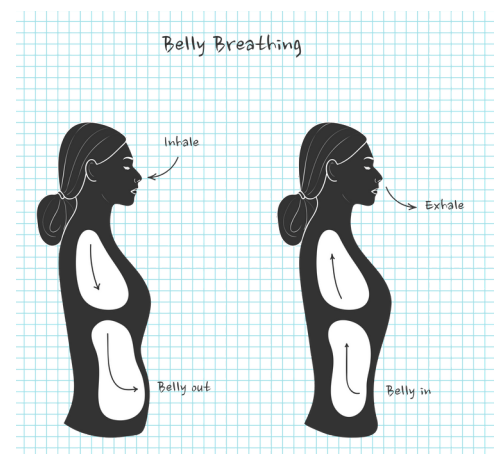
There is a specific pair of nerves that go from the brain directly to the big muscles in your neck that we tend to pull close to our ears when we are stressed. The moment that we perceive danger or stress, these nerves are activated to make sure our neck is protected from potentially lethal impact. These muscles also help us lift the chest in order to make more space to breathe as in a dangerous situation you need a fully functioning brain that is in extra demand of oxygen. This is a really helpful and may save your life in a threatening situation.

The downside is that when we keep breathing like this and using those big muscles they will become tight and may even get fatigued leaving them unable to relax. This changes the overall tension of the musculoskeletal frame of your body, thus affect your posture.

*just
breathe*

When we are **stressed** we often forget about everything else but **survival**. Even translated to today's relatively unarmful environments (we don't tend to deal with tigers or bears like our ancestors did) our stress response makes us focus **outwards** and forget about what's happening inside. This is important because if we want to improve our posture we need to be in the right state of being.

First feel in which part of your body most of your breathing is taking place. This may be in your chest or in your belly. If you find it difficult to feel this, place one hand on your chest and the other on your belly and feel which hand is moving most during your breath. Then feel the character of your breath; is it deep and slow or is it shallow and quick? If most of your breathing is happening in your belly and it is a slow and deep cycle, you are on the right track and you can move to step 2. If this is not the case, try for a few breaths to let the motion of the breath come from your belly. This means that the hand that rests on your chest will stop moving. It may be helpful to close your eyes whilst you are doing this. Finally, see if you can guide the cycles of your breath to slow down and become deeper.

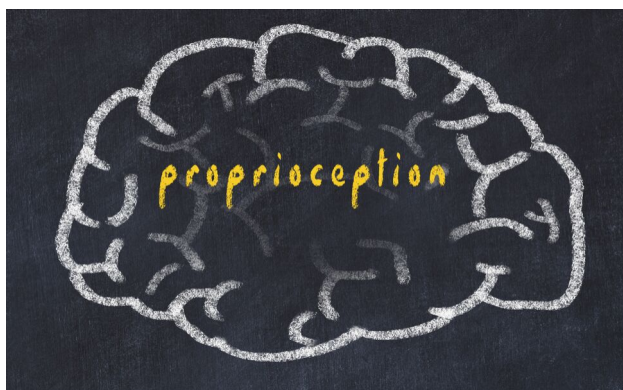


Now that we've taken a few big, deep breaths into our belly we are ready to focus on what's happening inside our body.

Step 2.

Become aware of your spine

Just as you can sense the movement of your breath or the rate of your heart contracting and pumping blood through your arteries when you take your pulse, with a little practice you can become aware of how much you are contracting or "gripping" specific muscles in your body and even to sense the position of your spine. We can all do this and it is called **proprioception**.



You have specific sensors in your body that send information to the brain about all sorts of things that occur in your body. The degree of acidity in your stomach or the levels of oxygen in your blood are examples of what is being measured. You also have sensors in all of your joints and muscles, particularly many in the upper neck, that inform the brain about your body's posture and its position in space. This is very important for your ability to have balance when you stand upright or when you are moving.

Just as you are, try to sense if certain any areas of your spine feel different than others. You may feel places that are more tight than others or areas that are more tensed. You can focus on the spine in the midline or on the muscles on either side of it. If this is difficult, take another deep breath into your belly and notice what is going on. You may feel that when you breathe your ribs move with your belly or maybe you can feel the breath move into the muscles of your back. Again, this might need some practice so don't worry if you are still unsure of what you are feeling.

Let's find a comfortable seated position where your back is not resting against the chair. Place your hands on your knees and focus closely on what you feel in your spine when you make the following movements:

- First, make yourself as tall as you can without raising your shoulders. Imagine somebody pulling you up from a cord from the top of your head.
- Now, open your chest whilst keeping your elbow close to your body and look up to the ceiling.
- And finally, curl your head forward letting the weight of your head fall forward.

Repeat this cycle as often as you want to sense what's happening in your spine.

Now that we've taken a deep breath into our belly and we are aware of our bodies, we can cover some powerful ways to improve your posture. But not before we've gone over some common mistakes people make regarding improving their posture.

Step 3.

Common mistakes people make

"Fixing your posture"

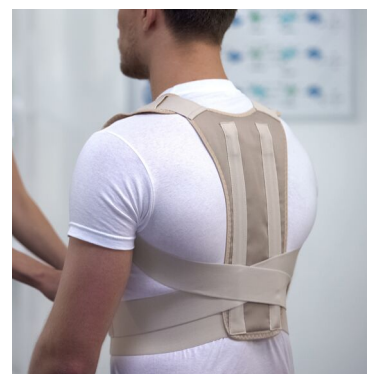
Trying to force your spine into an upright posture is unlikely to have a longstanding impact on your posture. When the spine loses its ideal posture due to muscular contractions, joints locking up, or other undue tensions, it will search for a posture in which it can be more at ease. You can see this clearly by people that have hurt their lower back and are stooping forward. Rather than forcing the spine into a more upright posture we need to address these tensions so that the spine can re-take its natural ideal posture. (More on this in the next step.)

Comments like: "But I get so tired when I sit up straight," are good indicators that a specific posture is forced. Ultimately, an upright posture is the ideal and natural posture of the spine that, without spinal constrictions, is nearly effortlessly.

Posture aids

The short-term use of posture aids can be very beneficial in specific scenarios when serious injuries or severe instabilities are taking place. The function of these aids is to provide stability when the body is not able to create it.

In the long-term use of posture aids the danger exists that the structures, especially the muscles, that are supposed to create stability will become deactivated. The muscles are basically relying on the posture aid doing their job. When the posture aid is then removed, the muscles may not switch on or too late and as a result the overall stability of the spine is lowered which makes it vulnerable to other injuries. To recover from such a scenario many hours of rehabilitation and reprogramming of the muscles are required.



Step 4.

Start chiropractic care

It all starts in the brain

The brain is the coordinator of everything that is happening in your body. Think of the brain like the maestro in an orchestra, who guides all the individual musicians to create one harmonious symphony. The brain receives information about the state of affairs from the sensors we discussed earlier and in return sends specific instructions to adapt to any situation that may occur. This information travels in the form of electrical impulses over a vast network of nerves. Think of these nerves as old school telephone cables. Now, when these cables, or nerves, are put under pressure the communication between the source, the brain, and the receiver, the body, may be interfered with leading to some off key notes in our orchestra. This interference is a consequence of what is called a **vertebral subluxation**, which is when a specific joint of the spine malfunctions and puts pressure on the nerves. The goal of chiropractic care is to reduce vertebral subluxations to allow the communication between brain and body to happen without any static, hissing, or echoing.

Why is this important for your posture?

The brain regulates and adapts the tension in your spine (the joints, ligaments, and muscles) for you to be able to go about your day moving, sitting, driving, and running all without being aware of this, until something goes wrong. When the vertebral subluxation restricts and blocks to some degree the level of free movement of the spine as a whole, it also interferes with the communication coming from and going to the brain. This results, simultaneous with many other consequences, in the undue tensions and muscular contractions that influence your ability to maintain an ideal, upright posture.

What we do

In The Chiropractic Institute we analyse posture as a part of our very thorough assessments of the spine and nervous system to detect vertebral subluxations and to evaluate state of coordination and adaptability in the overall body and nervous system. Based on this information we set out a customized plan of care which includes regular check-ups and chiropractic adjustments. The chiropractic adjustment starts a process in which the brain will recalibrate the tensions in your spine to allow you to find your naturally ideal posture.

When you struggle with your posture or if you are worried about the posture of your child, we recommend you to give us a call to see how we can help.

Step 5.

Other practical tips

Habits

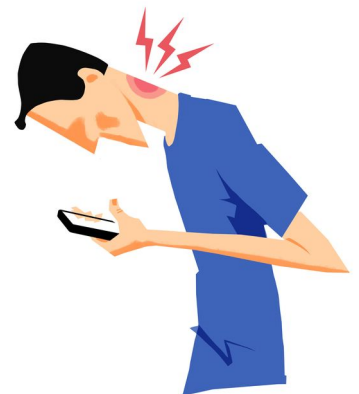
The first place to start is to have a close look at your habits. We all create habits, sometimes even without us being fully aware of it. When we create adaptive habits, meaning they are "good" habits, habits are great as they allow us to do things more efficiently. Maladaptive, or "bad," habits on the other hand can reinforce in our case faulty postures.



The chiropractic adjustment is very effective in changing your posture, nevertheless, a great emphasis has to be placed on every day postural habits. These are different for everybody, yet include sitting postures at work or on the sofa, standing postures and moving postures. In all these posture you can use the awareness of your breath and your spine to sense your posture and determine whether it is your optimal posture or not.

A few simple and basic tips on how to become aware of your posture:

- Where is your head relative to your shoulders? Is right over your shoulders or way forward such as in the image?
- Where are your shoulders relative to your chest? Are they rolled back and down or creeping up and rolling forward?
- Where is your upper body relative to your pelvis? Are you leaning forward or backward, or are they in line?
- If standing, where do you feel most pressure in your feet? In the toes, under the heels, or in the middle?



It is not always as straight forward or easy to become aware of your postural habits, let alone find out whether they are "good" or "bad." Don't hesitate to contact us, we are here to help.

After thoughts

Creating your optimal posture is a process

There is no such thing as a quick fix when it comes to creating your optimal posture. At least not if you are looking to make a longstanding impact on your posture. When your spine is well adjusted it still may require serious lifestyle changes to create healthy adaptive postural habits. We have to take care of our spine just as we do with our teeth. Regular check-ups at the dentist and daily routine brushing translated into regular check-ups at the chiropractor and daily postural hygiene practices.

When your spine is well adjusted it may still necessary to strengthen specific muscles that have been deactivated for a while or help relax other muscle that have been working over hours. Movement is a very effective way to do so, therefore, we have teamed up with yoga and pilates studios that respect your body's needs and limits to aid the process.

