

[IMAGE]

The Key to Perfect Posture

Finding the Right Balance

By Dr. Steven P. Weiniger

When I lecture about posture, people often tell me they know they have bad posture, and then attempt to "stand straight." This usually works for about 30 seconds, until their mind wanders and they slouch into their familiar round-backed, forward-head slump.

Part of their problem is that posture is mostly unconscious. We can focus on and be conscious of posture for a few minutes at best, but the vast majority of our waking hours are spent thinking about things other than posture.

The other part of the problem is that posture issues begin in the space between perceptions (where we think we are) and true, objective reality (where we really are). For example, if you *know* you're standing straight, with good posture, does that mean you really are? And if you are standing twisted, how effective is exercise going to be?

In our practice, we take clinical pictures of our patients' posture, and it is absolutely astounding how crooked many people stand, even when they believe they're straight as an arrow! But there is hope. With the help of chiropractic, many people have successfully strengthened their posture. The path to strengthening posture consists of three steps: 1) Becoming aware of where we are; 2) Becoming aware of where we should be; and 3) Retraining the body to move and balance differently.

Step 1: Posture Consciousness

Young woman balancing large book on top of her head. - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark

Becoming Aware of Where We Really Are

First, have a friend take a picture of your posture. Alternatively, stand straight in front of a mirror with your eyes closed and then, without moving, open them. Take a conscious look at your posture. Observe what is level, what is not, and what is different from one side to the other.

Step 2: Wrong vs. Strong Posture

Being Aware of Where We Should Be

Anyone who is standing up is, by definition, balanced. But how well you are balanced is a different question. Posture is quite literally *how* you balance your body. There are infinite combinations of possible joint positions that result in a body balancing. However, there are far more combinations that result in a body falling down. As long as a body is not falling down, the posture is balanced - maybe not very well, but it is balanced.

Unless you have a perfect body, no one has "perfect" posture. The goal for strong posture is to achieve the best biomechanical alignment of the body where all the muscles and joints are ideally aligned to work as well as possible while stressing the body the least.

Posture is how you balance your body, and it is dynamic, not static. Posture is a trade-off between flexibility and stability, between motion and effort. Postural balance is the ability to control your body's position in space, and keep your body upright and stable, especially when challenged. In other words, the strength of your posture is how well you know, and can control, where your body is in space.

Weakly balanced posture requires more energy to stay upright, resulting in mechanical stress and premature joint wear. So, posture is about more than standing straight, and improving posture involves more than just telling someone to stand straight and keep their shoulders back. Improving posture means strengthening how the body balances and how it moves.

Here is a simple balance test you can use to test yourself: Simply stand on one foot for 30 seconds. If you cannot balance on one leg for 30 seconds, or if you flail about, your internal perception of where your body is in space does not agree with true reality. As a result, when you move or exercise, your motion is not symmetrical and you will compensate by working some muscles more and others less.

One-leg balance exercises are tools to align our internal perceptions of posture with external reality. When one-leg balance is worse on one side than the other, there is unbalanced muscle function and joint stress. A 1997 study in the *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society* showed that older people who could not balance on one leg had more than twice the risk of being injured in a fall.

Most people with poor posture, as well as nearly all people with low back pain, have weak balance on one or both sides. Not surprisingly, after I adjust patients with balance issues, they frequently tell me that not only do they feel better, they also report being able to balance better and "feel lighter." Patients feel lighter after an adjustment because a stressed posture requires more energy to maintain balance; when they are aligned, they can balance with less effort.

Step 3: Retrain Your Body

By strengthening your posture with 10 minutes a day of posture exercise, along with regular chiropractic care, you can stand taller, with less pain, and actually age better. Daily posture exercise creates an awareness of body placement, helps stretch shortened muscles and ligaments, and gives people the ability to stay active. According to a 2001 study in the *Archives of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation*, posture exercises also strengthen muscles that have weakened. Stronger posture not only helps back and neck pain; patients also report improvement with problems ranging from knee pain to headaches, and many tell me they feel, and look, taller.

The relationship between posture and general health is not surprising, since posture is the physical end result of how your body is dealing with the millions of inputs about your environment the brain receives from the nervous system every second. In fact, if you want to know how a person is feeling today, look at their posture and how they move. Is their motion stiff and guarded, like an old person? Or do they move smoothly, with grace and ease? When someone has strong posture, you look at them and know they have energy and vitality.

A carpenter's level. - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark Simple and inexpensive tools, such as exercise balls, can help you begin on a path to strengthen your balance and posture. Remember, safety first: Consider using a ball that will not explosively deflate if punctured.

People tell me they like doing their posture exercises because they notice a difference in how they feel; they can breathe deeper, and have less stress and more energy. But I know the biggest benefit is this: If I can help keep them moving well as they get older, they will be able to stay active, exercise and feel good as they age.

Teach Your Children About Good Posture

Teach your children the following posture exercises, part of the "Straighten Up America" (www.straightenupamerica.org) spinal health program, and start them on the road to a lifetime of proper posture. Note: Always check with your doctor first to make sure this program is appropriate to your child's specific health needs, and let them know if any exercise causes your child pain.

The Inner Winner

- Stand straight and tall with your head high.
- Put your ears, shoulders, hips, knees and ankles in a straight line.
- Pull your belly button toward your spine.

Trap Openers (can be done before and after other posture exercises)

- Breathe deeply and calmly; relax your tummy.
- Let your head hang loosely forward and gently roll it from one side to the other.
- Using your fingers, gently rub the area just below the back of your head, on your neck.
- Relax your shoulders and gently roll them backward.
- Do this for a count of 15.

Flying Friends

The Eagle

- Stand like an Inner Winner (head up high and belly button in).
- Put your arms straight out to the side and pull your shoulders together in the back.
- Breathe air in and slowly raise your arms until your hands touch together over your head.
- Breathe air out and slowly lower your arms to your side.
- Repeat three to five times.

The Hummingbird

- Stand like an Inner Winner.
- Put your arms out to the side with your hands up, and pull your shoulders together in the back.
- Make small backward circles with your hands and arms.
- Bend at the waist from side to side while you keep the circles going.

- Keep it going while you count to 10.

The Butterfly

- Stand like an Inner Winner.
 - Put your hands behind your head and gently pull your elbows backward.
 - Slowly and gently press your head against your hands while you count to two.
 - Relax and breathe.
 - Repeat this three times.
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