



straighten up for strength

Maintaining good posture helps your muscles and organs work more efficiently

If your average day involves several hours hunched over a computer and unwinding with a few precious moments collapsed on the couch before flitting about the kitchen making dinner, remembering to keep your posture correct may not come easily.

But all that hunching and hurrying can take a toll on your muscles and joints, and it ultimately affects your posture — which is more important to your well-being than you might think.

Having good posture means your body works and rests in positions where minimal strain is placed on supporting muscles and ligaments. Ideal posture keeps bones and joints in proper alignment so muscles are used most efficiently, helping to prevent fatigue, backaches, chronic pain and abnormal wearing of joint surfaces, which can result in arthritis.

"Posture is important because having a stable base, or core, is important," said Nora Sullivan, outpatient physical therapy supervisor at the Galter LifeCenter. "If core muscles are strong and our alignment is optimal, we can be most effective and efficient in any activity, whether that be sitting and working at a computer, running a marathon or carrying a box."

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Heather Fraeick, clinical massage therapist and complementary health services supervisor at the Galter LifeCenter, teaches posture classes with a focus on how stretching, strengthening and massage therapy can contribute to a healthy posture.

"Among other things, good posture means proper organ alignment," which means proper organ function, Fraeick said, "and it prevents muscular compensation and pain patterns that can lead to more serious health issues."

No slumping on the job

Fraeick said it's especially important to be conscious of your posture if you work at a desk, as 40 hours a week in the same position can lead to serious back and neck pain if you're slumping or not properly supporting your lower back.

"The ideal posture for sitting at a desk is '90-90-90' — a 90-degree angle for hips, knees and elbows, with your feet touching the floor. Also, your computer monitor should be such that you're looking straight ahead, and not up too high or down too low," she said.

A properly-aligned sitting position at a desk means your ears are over your shoulders, and your shoulders are over your hips. When you slump, your head leans too far forward, and your neck muscles will shorten and tighten. After several hours in that position, that stress can lead to a tension headache and stiff, sore muscles.

Don't slouch on the couch

Even when you're relaxing or sleeping, it's smart to be mindful of your posture. On the couch, for example, reclining on a large pillow is better than propping your neck on



the side of the couch. And even when you're totally relaxing and watching a movie, it's still important to support your lower back.

"When you're sleeping, keep your body in a neutral position, maintaining its

natural curves, if possible," said Sullivan. "A moderately firm bed is best, with a small contour pillow to support your neck. If you're on your side, having a pillow between your knees keeps your spine in a more neutral position."

Having the spine in a more neutral position keeps rotational forces from going through your low back and into your hip, which would aggravate any existing conditions. w

Pointers for a poised posture

Flexibility, circulation and posture are all improved and maintained with strength training and regular, gentle stretching exercises.

Strength Training

- Use light weights and high reps to help muscles stay strong and balanced.
- Pay particular attention to core (torso and trunk) muscles, as they are important for good posture and a more even workload distribution on your muscles.
- Always consult your physician when beginning a new exercise program, and create a custom strength training program with guidance from a professional to ensure you are using proper form to maximize results and prevent injury.

Stretching

Hold each of the following stretches for 20 to 60 seconds on each side, repeat 10 times, and always move slowly — no sudden jerks or bounces.

- **Neck stretch** Slowly tilt your head forward, back, left and right over your shoulders, while gently massaging your neck. Never roll your head in a circle, as this can cause unnatural strain.
- **Pectoral stretch** Face through a doorway with your arm flush against the doorframe. Push gently against your arm. The stretch should be felt across the chest muscles.
- **Lumbar stretch** Lying on your back, gently pull one knee toward your chest, holding your leg with both hands. You should feel this stretch in your lower back and hip.