

PHYSIO TIPS

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DOES POSTURE MATTER?



Physio Tips is a monthly newsletter aimed at educating the public regarding the latest evidence in injury management, without all the medical jargon. We will keep it simple and concise, but full of knowledge gems in order to empower and equip you.

REACH OUT TO US

Have you ever been told that you have “bad or incorrect” posture? Posture has literally become engrained in our dialect when talking about back, shoulder or neck pain.

Multiple studies have compared the postures of pain free individuals with those complaining of pain and found no real differences. Despite these findings, poor posture is still being blamed as a major contributor to pain. We live in a time where health-conscious people are haunted by the idea that they should correct their posture. But is it necessary? Can aches and pains even be attributed to poor posture in the first place? Let’s look at some golden nuggets of information.



What is posture?

Contrary to popular belief, posture is not merely a static position, but involves a dynamic pattern of reflexes and adaptive responses to forces that keep us from being upright and functional. These include gravity, awkward working conditions, abnormal anatomy and athletic challenges. If you start to tip over or lose the stability you need to do something, your postural reflexes kick in and engage muscles to pull you into an upright position again. We habitually hold ourselves upright and move in ways that serve musculoskeletal, social and emotional needs.

What is poor posture?

Poor posture is any habitual, self-imposed positioning that causes physical stress. Stressors that contribute to poor posture include postural challenges and postural strain. A postural challenge is anything that makes it harder to maintain a comfortable position (eg. work station setup). Postural strain refers to continual load forcing us into a certain position (eg. carrying a heavy rucksack). Both these factors can result in overload of structures if maintained for too long.





More on postural strain

Carrying a heavy backpack slung over one shoulder is a *postural strain* – it is a circumstance that makes it difficult to be comfortable or to maintain a comfortable position. Typing incessantly is also a postural strain. It is not a bad habit, it's something that (some of us) have to do – and it is a challenge to our bodies. Much “poor posture” is just awkwardly coping with a postural strain. Many postural strains can be removed or avoided if the problem is recognized or identified.

Pain and posture

Posture is only one of many hypothetical factors that could contribute to pain, but in many cases, it is probably not contributing at all. This is obvious from the body of evidence that suggests that the postures of people with persistent pain do not differ from those who are pain free. We have some wonderful sensors (called ASICs) within our tissues that sense changes in pH value. If we don't move around, or put strain on our tissues, blood flow is reduced. This in turn causes a drop in pH which triggers our ASICs sensors to send messages to our brain. The brain will then try and get us to move to restore the pH - and one way of getting us to do this is by making us feel pain. Therefore the issue is often a lack of movement, rather than a specific 'bad' posture.



What is good posture

A good posture is dynamic and adaptable. The emphasis is on movement and changing our posture frequently. We should experiment with alternatives and new ways of moving in order to adapt to the varied environments we find ourselves in. This means that the occasional 'slouch' is not such a bad thing! There is no ultimate “correct” posture - only positions that are easier to maintain for a long period. Even “optimal” postures that are adopted for too long may cause problems.



Here are some useful tips to assist with maintaining healthy postural habits

Tip 1 - Remove barriers

Address major systemic barriers. Some factors will make it particularly difficult to achieve variety in your posture and can also make you more susceptible to experiencing pain. These include:

- Fatigue, lack of sleep and high stress levels
- A job with significant postural stress - as far as possible adjustments should be made to try and reduce sustained positions and repetitive movements
- Poor overall health

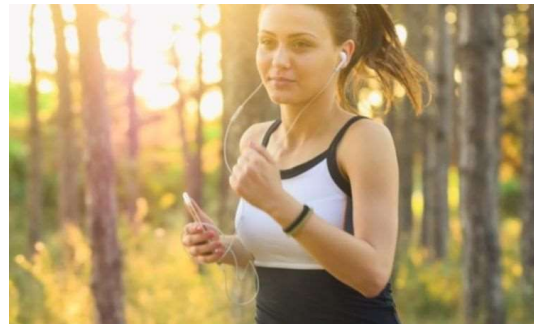


Tip 2 - Make movement a habit

Practice makes perfect and movement is medicine - make a conscious effort to change positions regularly throughout the day. Physical exercise can be very useful for this, as well as intermittent stretches or standing/walking more often throughout the day.

Tip 3 - Exercise

Being generally physically active in a variety of ways may be the best way to improve or deal with postural stresses. A sedentary lifestyle contributes significantly to the degeneration of postural reflexes, so rather stay active if you can



Tip 4 - challenge your muscles

Improve postural control by challenging it:

- Sit on an exercise ball or a wobble cushion instead of a chair while working at the computer.
- Stand and work for short periods
- Walk on sand or uneven terrain to challenge you postural muscles.

Tip 5 - optimise your environment

Make your work space work for you. This does not mean you need a fancy chair - the basics just need to be in place. Make sure you do not have to reach too far or too high to reach items (such as your mouse) and adapt the height of your work surface to suite your body. The aim is not to create a perfect posture, but rather to eliminate unnecessary postural stresses.

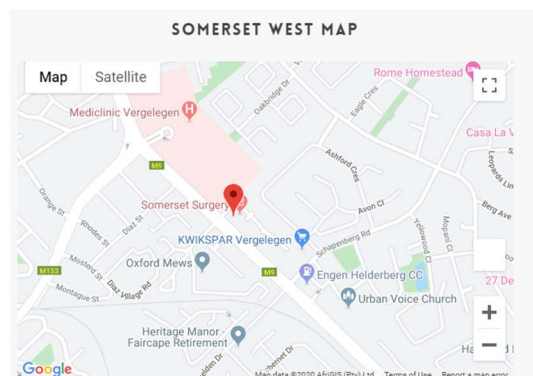


In conclusion, much of so-called “poor posture” is actually just postural stress and being stuck with less than optimal ergonomics. So rather than focus on changing your posture or finding one perfect posture, think about ways to move more and add variety to your day. If you need any help with this you can contact one of our physiotherapists.

NO POSTURE IS PERFECT, SO CHANGE IT OFTEN
WATCH THIS SPACE FOR PHYSIO TIPS IN JUNE - TO ICE OR NOT

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