

7 Tips for Better Posture and Neck and Shoulder Health

It's trivia time! What do bench pressing, sitting at a desk all day, carrying a purse over the same shoulder, and playing video games all have in common?

If you answered "slumped shoulders," you're correct! Also known as "kyphotic posture," "slumped shoulders" is a condition it would behoove all of us to improve if we want to prevent and reduce back pain, migraines, poor digestion, immobility and injuries ... not to mention the perpetuation of mothers' favorite piece of chiropractic advice, "*Don't slouch!*"

When looking at yourself or another person from the side, kyphotic posture is identifiable by an excessive, "C"-shape curvature of the thoracic (mid-region) of the spine. This curvature causes the lumbar (low back) to flex, negating its natural extension as the posterior muscles are lengthened and weakened. The shoulders round forward while the pelvis tilts backward, causing the abdominals and chest muscles to shorten and tighten.

Whether you are an older adult with muscle weakness—particularly in the spinal extensors that attach to the back of your spine—an otherwise healthy student, office worker who sits for long periods of time, an avid Xbox fan or a devoted gym rat, it's time to take a stand (literally!) for proper posture.

Below, I outline seven tips you can follow to help you work out the kinks of unhealthy habits, as well as introduce new, beneficial ones that will address and correct sloppy posture on the spot. We'll start off with a few easy-to-do exercises that will strengthen the critical muscles that facilitate non-

slouching shoulders of which your mother would be proud.

1. Do shoulder pulls. As part of a warm-up before your workout, or even during a computer break (it's best to stand up, walk around, and stretch every 20 minutes), do the following exercise, and practice its technique when performing movement such as the overhead press or front squat:

- a. Stand straight, but relaxed.
- b. Pull your bellybutton in toward your spine, and pull your shoulder blades down and back, trying to squeeze them together.
- c. Hold the contraction for three seconds, and repeat 10 times.

NOTE: If this is too challenging, try the exercise lying down on your back.

2. Do "the bird dog." I love this exercise because it challenges and strengthens the core (intrinsic muscles deep within the torso), which is key for treating and preventing back pain. Like shoulder pulls, this move is excellent to do before workouts or during desk breaks.

- Tuck your toes under your feet.
- Make sure your wrists and palms are lined up under your shoulders. Bellybutton is pulled in to ensure your abs are tight. Neck is neutral, eyes are on the floor.
- Raise your right arm and left leg simultaneously, but don't raise them above your hips. Keep your hips and shoulders square, and make sure your lower back doesn't arch. Hold for five seconds. Slowly return to the starting position and do the move on the opposite side. Complete 5 to 10 repetitions on each side.

3. Stretch your chest. Tight and weak back and chest muscles are common culprits of kyphotic posture. I love the following

chest stretch, as it's straightforward, convenient and, most of all, effective.

a. Stand at end of a wall or in doorway and face perpendicular to the wall. Bend your arm and place the inside of it on the wall's surface. Position your bent elbow at shoulder height.

b. Turn body *away* from the positioned arm. Hold this stretch for 30 seconds each side.

4. Stretch your back.

a. Hang from a pull-up bar with an overhand, shoulder-width grip.

b. Allow the muscles to relax and lengthen. Hold for 30 to 60 seconds.

5. Use a foam roller. If you don't have a foam roller, I highly recommend that you invest in one. They're one of my favorite fitness tools for your home or office because they allow you to practice what's called self-myofascial release (SMR), or "poor man's massage." SMR involves putting pressure on any adhesions formed in your muscles and connective tissue, which are caused by immobility, injury or inflammation—which often occurs post-workout.

To address your posture, lay a foam roller across your spine in the middle of your back, right below your shoulder blades.

a. Your knees should be bent, feet firmly planted on the floor, and hands comfortably behind your head.

b. Lift your hips off the ground, then roll forward so the foam roller travels down your back an inch. Drop your hips to the floor.

c. Next, roll until the foam roller is hovering a couple inches below your neck, then slowly roll back down following the same pattern. If you feel any areas of stiffness, roll

back and forth on top of the area for 10 to 15 seconds.

d. Continue this for two to three minutes. Feeling a bit of pain and discomfort the first few sessions is normal, but stick with it—over time, your upper back mobility will improve!

6. Switch up your sitting position. Apart from standing up and/or stretching during breaks, it's important to be cognizant of how you're sitting, as staying in one position for too long creates stiffness, tightness and fatigue, all of which encourage poor posture and perpetuate pain.

Every 10 minutes or so, change your position. For instance, if you're seated with your right leg crossed, switch and cross your left leg instead. Then try propping up an ankle onto your opposite knee, or place both feet on the floor. Additionally, you can alternate between shifting forward to the edge of the seat with a straight back and sitting back against the support of the office chair to ease the work of your back muscles.

7. Don't sleep on your stomach. Sleeping on your stomach is a no-no because the inability to maintain a neutral spine causes a strain on your lower back, as well as possible neck pain. Also, because you must turn your head to one side in order to breathe while on your stomach, your head and neck can get out of alignment. You may not notice any pain or discomfort right away, but over time, neck problems are likely to occur.

If you simply cannot sleep any other way, then try using a thinner pillow that will decrease the angle of your head and neck. Also, place a pillow under your hips; this will relieve pressure from your spine. And lastly, be diligent about performing the stretches and exercises mentioned above. Doing so will help get your body back into alignment and gently strengthen and lengthen the supporting muscles of your neck and back.

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