



# Stand Tall

Best Health – Sept 2010

## *10 ways to improve your posture and feel more confident*

One of the simplest ways to make yourself look slimmer, taller and more toned is by maintaining good posture. You will also feel and look more confident when your muscles are relaxed and working as they should.

Plus, proper posture can help prevent other health issues. “Sixty percent of people who are visiting their primary healthcare practitioner for musculo– skeletal pain complain of neck pain,” says Dr. Larry Ohlhauser, an Edmonton physician and author of *The Healthy CEO*. “A major factor in the root cause of this pain stems from poor posture.”

Good posture, on the other hand, lets you breathe naturally and efficiently. People who sit up straight tend to look alert because correct breathing allows the maximum amount of oxygen to reach the brain.

Proper posture means respecting the natural curves in your spine: the slight forward curve at the base of your neck, the slight backward curve between your shoulders and the forward curve in your lower back. These curves help your back absorb the force of gravity and the weight of your body. Any distortion in these curves places strain on your vertebrae and the muscles that support them.

The long-term effects of poor posture include degeneration of the joints in your spine, and lengthening or shortening of the ligaments and muscles in your back. This can lead to musculoskeletal problems including stiffness, poor flexibility and back pain.

A stooped or hunched posture can also put pressure on your internal organs, interfering with their efficiency and function. Your digestive system and lungs are particularly affected. When your chest wall is scrunched up, you can take only shallow breaths.

Here are some simple tips for maintaining the right posture.

### 5 Things to Avoid

1. Don't slouch. Sit and stand straight with your ears, shoulders and hips in one vertical line. If you sit slouched, the pressure on your spine is up to 150 percent greater than when standing.
2. Don't overcompensate. Holding your back too straight puts the spine under almost as much pressure as when it's too arched.
3. Don't make poor posture a habit. Over time, the muscles and ligaments in your back begin to lengthen or shorten to adapt to your poor posture, making it feel natural.
4. Avoid sleeping on your front with your neck twisted to one side. Both your mattress and pillow should be supportive.
5. Don't twist your body when getting into or out of your car. When getting in, sit sideways on a seat, then turn your whole body around. When getting out, turn your body toward the door, then put both your feet on the ground and stand up.

### 5 Key To-Dos

1. Check your posture. Take a look at yourself whenever you pass a mirror. Assess your posture regularly, both sitting and standing; it's easy to pick up bad habits without noticing (see “Two Instant Fixes” below).

2. Change your position regularly. If you have to stay in one position for an extended period of time, try to take a break every 20 minutes, and do some shrugs, neck stretches, shoulder rolls, and arm and back stretches to loosen up your spine.
3. Avoid wearing high heels for extended periods. They accentuate the curve of your back and tilt your pelvis forward, which can contribute to knee and back problems.
4. Carry objects with care. When using a backpack, use both shoulder straps. If carrying a heavy bag, alternate the arm you use. (For advice on body-friendly bags, see page 42.)
5. Adjust your car seat to an upright or slightly reclining position, as this stops you from slouching and reduces the effects of the car's vibration on your spine.

Two instant fixes you can try now

Ohlhauser offers two quick ways to evaluate—and improve—your posture:

**Pick a wall, any wall** Stand with your back to a wall, and with feet six inches (15 cm) away. Lean back so that your buttocks and shoulders touch the wall. Move your head back until it also touches. This is good posture. If your chin moves up as your head moves back, you have poor posture. If so, do this move three times a day, holding the correct position for 30 seconds. This will help retrain your back muscles.

**Rearview test** Sit in the driver's seat, and move your head back to touch the headrest. Expand your chest and move shoulders back. Now try to look in the rearview mirror. You will likely find that the mirror is too low for you, and you'll have to adjust it. Keep it in that position, and next time you get into the car, you'll be reminded to maintain that proper neck alignment.

**Try this DVD** "Standing Tall," part of the two-DVD set Strong & Healthy Back from STOTT PILATES, uses simple and slow moves to help you train yourself to maintain proper body position, lengthen your spine, widen your shoulders and engage your abdominal muscles. The exercises provide a great warm-up routine and encourage proper form for other exercises.

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