

Keeping your body functioning well: It’s all about posture

By Andrew Loscutt
Correspondent

Most people understand that good posture is critical to their health and well-being, but many don’t know the why or how to improve posture.

One’s posture is a system of integrated joints, muscles, and fascia all working in relation to each other. This relationship determines many problems people face as imperfections manifest themselves over time into discomfort, pain, and, sometimes, injury.

When working on posture, be mindful of the interconnected system, and this relationship. It is a give-and-take that often provides relief, allows more efficient movement, and reduces the risks of injury.

Matt Kirchoff, DPT of Therapeutic Associates says, “I always tell my patients that the end goal of postural exercises is to promote a better awareness of when your body is adopting poor posture that may eventually lead to the onset of pain.”

Posture is an effect of the conditions of daily living positions and has a tremendous effect on our musculoskeletal

system. Kirchoff continues: “Postural awareness is something that requires ongoing practice and mindfulness.”

Often, the positions of daily living require a person to be in a forward-leaning position — the shoulders rounded forward, head held looking down, waist slightly bent. This position is used to read, type, cook, or to perform anything with delicate hand movement (*see related story, page 15*). Problems come from holding this position long-term.

The head, which is balanced on the small discs of the cervical spine, tilts its axis forward placing much of it’s weight off-axis. Kirchoff says: “A head held in a forward position, increases its impact on the spine with 60 pounds of pressure.” This causes a chain reaction down to the thoracic or mid-back. The added tension here causes muscles to be held in tension. This position will lock up your mobility. Moving down the chain, the lower back muscles are compensating, and thus become overworked.

Most of us spend a lot of time in a seated position. With the front of the hips bent, and

the pelvis rolled under the weight of the body, this creates shortened hip muscles and de-activated glutes (the muscles of the butt). Without proper function, these muscles relinquish their responsibility, and the lower back once again is put in a quandary. Back-pain can ensue. Their intuition tells you to stretch or relieve the area that is causing the pain. This approach may not be the proper way to address the issue. Stretching a muscle which has been held in a lengthened, tense position for a long time only exacerbates potential problems. Correcting the cause, rather than treating the symptom, should be the direction of relief.

Activating the muscles which are forced to be held in a lengthened tense position can provide the proper treatment. To work on the upper body, start with a chest stretch in a doorway or against a corner. Stretch the underarm muscles by placing the hands on a table and bending forward. The hips can be worked with a prone press up stretch. This starts with a person face-down, with elbows and forearms underneath the chest. Press the

arms into the floor and raise the chest up. This places the hips in an extended position. Hold the stretch for 30 seconds and repeat three times. Also, an extended lunge will promote range-of-motion in the front hip area.

Activating the muscles which counteract these positions will be important. For the upper body try shoulder-blade squeezes. With arms up and bent at 90 degrees pull the scapula back as if the chest is being puffed out. Hold the end position for a count, then relax. Repeat this 20 times. For the hips, try a supine hip extension. Lay face up, place the feet on the floor with a bent leg. Next, push the hips up and off the floor as high as possible. A contraction will be felt on the back of the thigh and in the buttock. Repeat for three sets of 10 with a brief hold at the highest position.

Last, a core plank can also be very effective in working the posterior core muscles which support one’s back. Start with elbows on the ground, and toes on the floor, lift the body, keeping the core tight

and alignment from ankle to shoulder. Keep awareness on the shoulders stability, the low back being flat and whether or not there is sagging or rounding anywhere. Hold for 10 seconds and repeat 10 times.

A few minutes of practice can help counteract the effect of time spent in a less-than-ideal position. However, someone who has been in this position for a very long time without doing anything about it will require more work. A qualified professional, such as one of the many therapists in the community or an exercise professional can provide the proper guidelines for individual needs.

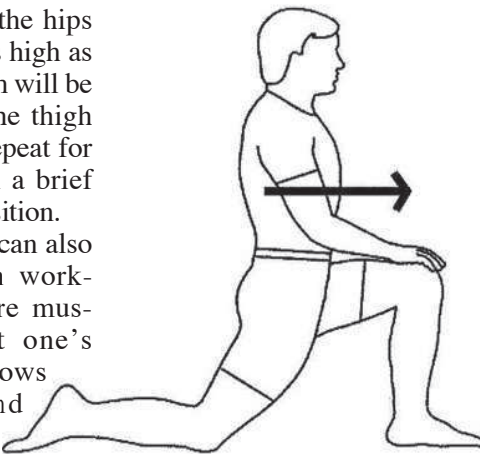


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