

Contact: Bev Hillman
Vancouver Personal & Physical Training
PH: 604-948-0709

Pleasant Posture

By: Bev Hillman

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It's time to revisit the ongoing challenge of "good posture". It doesn't take long for outside influences such as gravity and prolonged sitting to begin to sabotage your good habits into bad ones. Sometimes a little reinforcement is required.

When you catch your reflection in a window or mirror is your back rounded, head jutting forward or chest and shoulders drooping? Or, do you see yourself walking tall, strong and proud?

Good posture can not only make you look and feel younger, stronger and more confident; it can help improve your breathing and sports performance as well as decrease your risk of injury. And, over the long run you will maintain your quality of life by preventing painful physical strain to your joints. Postural problems often reflect a person's lifestyle and can be caused by any one of a number of reasons including muscle imbalance, compensation for injuries, ergonomic problems or poor alignment during fitness and sports activities. Our muscles are also continually fighting gravity's downward pull as they try to maintain an upward posture.

Statistically, people who sit for long hours on the job are susceptible to a number of misalignments, especially when they sit with poor posture. Tight hip-flexors, hamstrings and chest/front shoulder muscles along with weak back and abdominals put stress on our bodies which in turn can lead to chronic aches and pains in the shoulders, neck and back. The good news is that with persistence and consistency, it is possible to change poor postural habits.

Start by finding neutral spine. In neutral, the spine maintains its natural curves and stress to the joints, muscles, tissue and vertebrae is minimized. The body is at its strongest position. In a side view of neutral, the natural double "S" curve of the vertebrae is obvious with the ear, shoulder, front of hip middle of knee cap and ankle in a straight line.

From a front view, the chin is pulled in, shoulders are relaxed down and rolled back causing the chest to lift, abdominals are contracted in and hips facing straight ahead (place your fingertips in front of hip bones and tilt pelvis front and back until hips point forward), knees are soft and track over the second toe and weight is distributed evenly on all four corners of the feet and ankles in alignment.

From the rear, shoulder blades should be pulled together slightly and down with gluts contracted to help set the pelvis. Neutral alignment should be maintained while sitting,

standing or moving. Try finding neutral using a wall. With buttocks, shoulder blades and back of head touching the wall, place a hand in the space between the low back and wall to feel the natural curvature of the spine. Now contract the abdominals and walk away holding this posture.

While at your workstation, try to take frequent breaks - every 45 minutes - to do postural stretching. If possible, get up and do another task that involves walking or standing in correct alignment which requires much less muscular effort than sitting with proper form.

Until bad habits can be replaced with good, remind yourself frequently by setting your sports watch for hourly posture checks. Use post-its on your computer and kitchen cabinets. Use a lumbar support in your car to encourage you to sit up straight and set your mirrors while in this position. Then when needed, adjust your posture not the mirrors.

Perform the appropriate exercises to correct your muscle imbalance. Stretch the tight muscles of the front of the upper body and then strengthen the weaker back muscles - including the lower back. Perform abdominal exercises that train the abdominals to hold the pelvis in neutral alignment rather than just doing the traditional torso curls and sit ups.

Also include exercises to strengthen and stretch the hip muscles that attach to the pelvis and can impact the alignment of your pelvis and lower back. Try yoga and pilates classes that emphasize body alignment and use core stability exercises to help strengthen your postural habit as well as open tight areas.

By being more aware of your good and bad posture and how much more efficient your body functions, the easier it will be to have good posture.

For more information contact Bev Hillman at 604-948-0709, or contact her via e-mail at bev@trainwithbev.com.

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Tel. 604-948-0709
info@trainwithbev.com
TrainWithBev.com