

straighten

Posture doesn't lie, so lose years and improve your health with a few simple adjustments to your lifestyle and exercise habits.

By Leroy Perry, DC

up

and fly right

I was sitting at a too-small table in a trendy restaurant, picking at the remains of an eggless Caesar salad and waiting for my companion to return (someday) from the ladies' room, when I noticed an old man sitting across the room who seemed to be wearing the same shirt I was.

"Geez, I hope mine looks better on me," I thought. As I self-consciously reached to straighten my collar, my sartorial double made the identical gesture. My jaw dropped; so did his.

I was looking in a mirror. And my first thought had been "old."

I focused all my attention on the familiar stranger in the glass. What had given me the impression of advanced age? It wasn't the hair, which was thinning but not gray. It was not the face, which was lined but not unduly creased. My eyes settled on the awkward angle of the neck, the sagging shoulders, the rounded back.

It was my posture. . . .



Sit up straight, your mother said, practically from the day you could sit up, period. Sloppy people slouch, she said. Lazy people slouch, she said. Sick people slouch, she said.

Mom was right, more so than she knew. It turns out that those stooping, drooping shoulders not only project fatigue and disinterest to the rest of the world, they can compromise your health. Like smoking cigarettes, what might seem a political statement at 19 ("I'm too cool to stand up for anything, much less myself")

can, at 39 or 59, result in serious medical problems.

Gravity, after all, is working against us from the time we take our first step. It pulls our body weight downward, creating a compressive load on every joint. How we stand, walk, run, sit, make love, sleep — all our daily activities — have a cumulative effect on skeletal development and deterioration.

Just Look at Yourself

Let's begin with a simple self-analysis: Stand facing a full-length mirror wearing as little clothing as possible. Check out your feet: Are they flat? Do your ankles pitch inward, creating a knock-kneed effect, or do they pitch outward, shifting your weight to the outside of the heels?

Good posture is dependent on the physics of proper weight bearing — every level affects the area above it. (The foot bone's connected to the ankle bone, and so forth.)

Improper weight distribution on your feet can



cause compensatory muscle development, resulting in knee, hip, back and upper-body problems. The straighter and more parallel your feet are, with your heel lining up behind the second toe, the better it is for your overall posture. If you notice obvious problems, consider consulting a podiatrist or orthopedist.

Now look at your ankles, knees, hips and shoulders. Is each pair aligned at the same height? Do your ankles and knees line up directly under the hip? Are your eyes parallel? Is your head vertically straight over your neck and spine? If not, you are either developing bad posture or already have it. If we dropped a plumb line from between your eyes, it should run down your mid-sternum, cross your navel and hang equidistant between your hips, knees, ankles and feet.

At this point, turn sideways and start again. Do you lock your knees in hyperextension? Do you arch your lower back, creating a swayback and protruding abdomen? Do you round your shoulders or curve your upper spine forward, causing your head and neck to stick out? Your lateral plumb line should hang from the middle of the ear downward through the shoulder, elbow, hip, mid-knee and mid-ankle.

Chain Reaction

Talk about rotten months: I lost an important assignment at work, I got the flu, twice, and someone made a \$4,000 fraudulent charge to my credit card. As I sat at the kitchen table trying to balance my checkbook (don't ask), it felt like the weight of the world was on my back.

It looked like it, too. My shoulders were halfway to touching the table and halfway to touching each other. I must have been sitting like that for hours, on and off, for weeks. I picked up my head, rolled back my shoulders, and took what felt like my first real breath of air in ages.

How important is good posture? It can make the difference between organs that function and organs that don't. For example, if your upper back curves forward, you might not be able to take a deep breath, and your heart may be so compressed that it feels like it's pumping twice as hard to do its work as it should.

No wonder you feel beat up inside.

As we age, the upper body starts to cave into the lower body, magnifying any lower-body instability. (The friction that ensues causes heat, which causes demineralization, and the accumulative effect is arthritis.) Often, it isn't chronological age that makes you feel old but rather poor posture causing your body to adapt to muscle weakness.

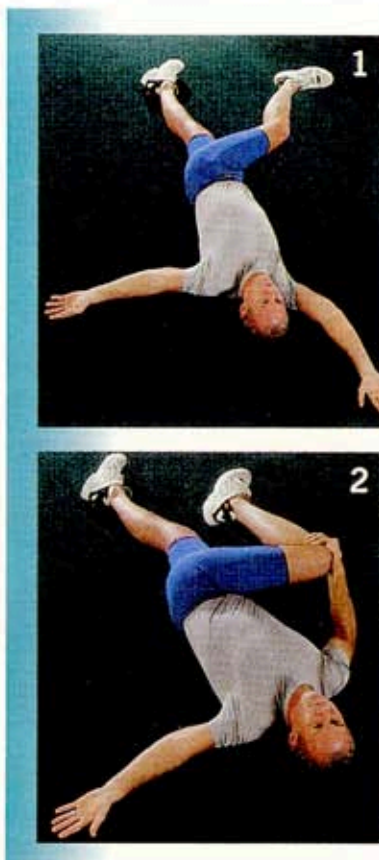
swayback condition and your lower back is working extra hard to support it. I didn't notice it at first because of the way your body compensates for it."

I looked at myself in the mirror. He was right. And the curvature was what pushed my stomach forward, giving me the never-ending illusion of being overweight.

Posture also affects the eternal battle of the bulge.

Think of it in terms of Dockers: Levi Strauss has become very successful selling pants designed for the middle-aged male because they know his waistline will increase as the width or girth of his pelvis increases. (Sorry, but it's not just women who get wider hips. We all do.) Many men believe a wider waist is inevitable. But there is a difference between a fat gut and a poor postural waistline. If you keep certain muscles strong and others stretched, you can maintain the same waist size you had in college.

In correcting bad posture, remember that every action has an equal and opposite reaction. For example, if you have a collapsing posture because your upper back is too weak and your chest and the front of your neck are too strong, you must stretch the chest while strengthening the upper back. (You might also want to cut your bench presses in half or double your upper-back workouts.)



Morning Star

Lying flat with your legs straight, place your right arm above and behind your head and extend your left arm horizontally to create a 90-degree angle. As the left arm moves, bring the left leg diagonally across your body at a 45-degree angle up toward your opposite armpit (1). The shoulders must stay flat but the lower hip may rotate. Repeat in the opposite direction. Do not hold the position. Just stretch through it as completely as possible.

Perform five sets of both stretches. Then perform five sets with knees bent (not shown) and five sets pulling your knee across your body with the opposite hand (2).

Exercises designed by
Dr. Leroy Perry Jr.
Chiropractic Sports Specialist

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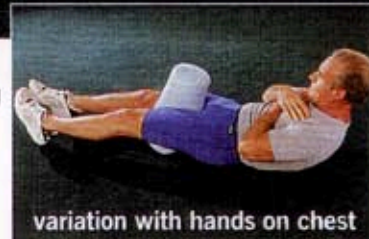
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Adductor/Abdominal Curl These exercises are dependent upon inner-thigh contraction using an adductor pad or pillow as a fulcrum. Using an Ab Roller might also be helpful if you have neck or upper-back instability.

While performing an abdominal crunch, squeeze the pad to isolate and activate your lower abdominal muscles. This exercise is effective in three positions: legs straight (1), knees bent (2) and legs on a chair (3). As with standard crunches, curl (don't lift) the upper body. These exercises can help decrease the size of your waist and reduce stress on your lower back. They can also reduce compression on the lumbar disc, helping to increase sexual vitality and stimulate intestinal peristalsis to aid in elimination.

variation with hands on chest

Adductor/Vertical Pelvic Tilt

Stand two foot-lengths from a wall with an adductor pad between the upper part of your thighs. Keeping your head and neck relaxed, lean forward against the wall until you reach a 30-degree angle. (Standing slightly pigeon-toed will reduce stress on the lower back; if you need to, bend your elbows.) Now tuck your pubic bone upward toward your navel without squeezing your buttocks or lower back. Perform at least 25 repetitions.

This exercise helps reduce swayback and pressure on the lumbar disc and sacroiliac joints, stretches the low-back muscles, and retrains the inner thighs and abdomen. It has proven helpful for men with prostate and impotence problems.

Slouch Less, Decompress

Over the last 25 years at the International Sportsmedicine Institute in Los Angeles we have developed a series of modified yoga exercises that we have used successfully with thousands of back-pain sufferers and patients with bad posture. We call these *decompression exercises*, and they are designed to enhance good posture by stretching the tight muscles as the weak muscles are strengthened. Like yoga, there are extra benefits to be gained from using proper breathing techniques: Inhale on the stretch or contraction, and exhale on the relaxation phase. Unlike yoga, the exercise is not held for a given time frame. We try to move through as full a range of motion as possible — as equally as possible on each side — emphasizing only those muscles we wish to decompress.

Performed once or twice daily, these exercises establish a foundation of muscle balance and coordination that will help you look, feel and even become, posturally speaking, younger. **P**

Bad posture usually results from muscle weakness in these areas: (1) inner thighs (adductor muscles), (2) lower abdomen and (3) middle and upper back. As the inner thighs weaken, the outer thigh muscles become dominant, flaring the pelvis and hips. Adductor weakness leads to abdominal weakness, which can make the lower back compensate by becoming chronically tight. This instability adds to hip flaring, increasing waist and hip dimensions and exacerbating back problems. A tight, swayed lower back causes the upper spine to lean backward. In order to keep the body from falling, the chest musculature stays tight, pulling the upper body forward; this overdevelops the front neck muscles leading to jaw, neck and headache complaints.

Because such developments happen slowly over time, many unfortunate conditions go uncorrected, leading to impotency, prostate complications, bulging or herniated discs, and sciatica neuritis.

Straight = Stretch and Strengthen

I'd been working with my trainer for a few weeks when he asked me if I had any back discomfort. "Just the pangs and twinges of getting older," I replied.

"I'm surprised," he said, "because you have a

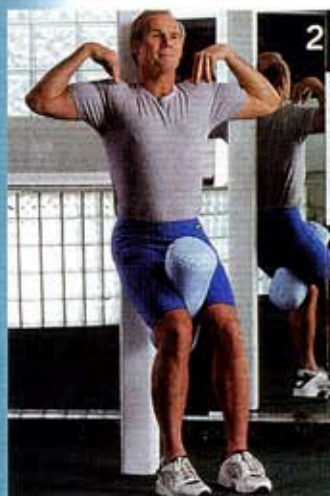
Tips for Good Posture

- Never sleep on your stomach.
 - Pick a mattress that supports you but is neither too hard nor too soft.
 - Adjust your car seat or steering wheel so your elbows are always bent at least 30 degrees when you're driving.
 - When you lift, always tuck your pubic bone up toward your navel to reduce low-back strain.
- When you stand, make sure your body follows its vertical plumb lines.
- When you sit, shoulders should be aligned vertically over the hips. Do not cross your legs at the thigh.
 - Sit symmetrically so there's pressure on both hips.
 - Do not carry a wallet in your back pocket; it will work as a wedge and cause misalignment of your hips and pelvis.
 - Avoid high-heeled boots and shoes; wear footwear with shock-absorbing rubber soles.



Reverse Shrug

Lean against the corner of a wall or door until it touches your entire spine from your lower and middle back to the back of your head. (Stand between one and two foot-lengths from the wall and use an adductor pad to isolate your inner thighs and abdomen.) Bend your knees and let your arms hang naturally. Without bending your elbows, perform a reverse shrug by raising your shoulders up to your ears, then backward (you should feel the shoulder blades pinching together) and finally lowering them straight down (1).



Repeat the exercise with your hands touching the shoulders and elbows extended to the sides (2), and again with arms extended and hands bent up as if pushing against a wall (3). Do not let your hands drop below your armpits. These exercises stretch the chest while strengthening the back, helping to increase lung capacity, to reduce pressure on the heart, and to create straighter posture. As a result, symptoms of neck pain, jaw pain and headaches are often greatly reduced.

