

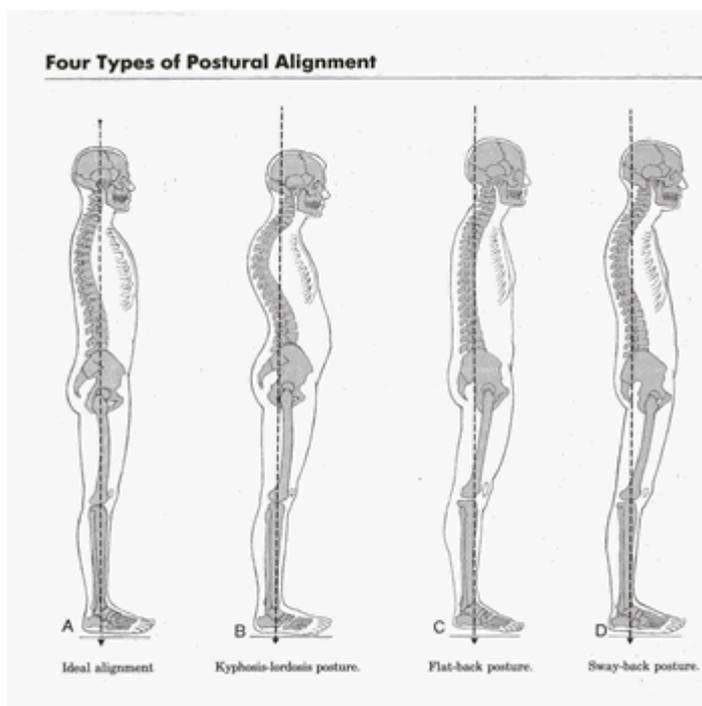
The importance of good posture

We all remember our mothers lecturing us about our posture, to stand up straight, get your shoulders back, don't slouch etc etc, but what we didn't all realise is that once again, mothers do know best and yes they are always right!

Posture is the way in which we stand and sit. Anatomically our bodies are designed so that in the correct posture our bones are all aligned, there is no stress on our ligaments and soft tissues, and our muscles are in their optimum position to work at their best.

With the age of computers and technologies many of us are spending a lot more time in front of the computer or sitting down. This leads to poor posture, over use syndromes, pain and obesity just to mention a few of the problems.

When we sit or stand with poor posture it places unwanted stress through parts of our body which aren't designed to take the stress, for example the discs in our backs and necks, the muscles supporting our necks and the ligaments which hold up our heads. This causes pain and discomfort in these areas including headaches. It also has a flow on effect and causes further muscles to be over used as compensation resulting in worsening symptoms.



So what is good posture?

Good posture is when your spine is in the correct alignment. See diagram A.

If we start off at the top of your head, you have to imagine someone is pulling you from a hair on the top of your head, you imagine yourself growing tall through this, so that your neck is lengthened and your eyes are on the horizon.

Your shoulders should be back, so that the points of your shoulders are facing the walls, you are not hunched or bent through your thoracic spine (the part between your shoulder blades). Imagine you are pulling your shoulder blades back and down, placing them into your back pockets, with your collar bones long and lengthened. See diagram picture B for example of kyphotic thoracic spine.

Your lower back should be in a neutral position. Our lower backs have a natural curve in them called a lordosis. If this curve is too much, it is referred to it as a sway back (diagram picture D). If the curve is too less people look very flat through their spine (diagram picture C). If you imagine your spine is like a stack of building blocks, if you can position the bottom blocks in the right position the rest should stack up nicely. To find neutral with your back you place your hands on your hips. If you imagine your pelvis is like a bucket of water, you tilt your pelvis forward – water would spill out the front, tilt it back – then water spills out the back, so neutral is where your pelvis is level. This gives you a curve in your lower back called neutral spine. If you are sitting you should be sitting on the bony bits of your bottom.

Lastly your knees should be slightly relaxed, and not extended all the way back, feet hip width apart and weight balanced on both feet.

Easy really isn't it!! This posture is able to be transferred into standing, sitting, driving and whilst walking and running.

Having the correct posture may seem like an effort at first. This is because the postural muscles have not been working and doing their job, making them weaker. Poor posture is just basically when you hang off your ligaments and joints. These are not designed for this and therefore we develop pain. If you maintain a poor posture for a length of time, certain muscles will tighten and other muscles will weaken. Joints will become stiff and may even become fused into that position, making it very difficult to change. I'm sure we can all picture the little old person walking down the road practically bent in half due to the curve of their spine! So the time to change your posture is now! Not once the bones are fused and you can no longer reverse the problem.

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Posture is one of the components that we are easily able to change, whilst we can't always change our jobs or the length of time we are sitting for, we can manipulate the way we sit and stand to cause less stress in our bodies and therefore reduce pain.

Exercise classes like Pilates are excellent for posture awareness and strengthening of core postural muscles. You can sit on a gym ball or swiss ball during the day to help with posture in front of the computer. If you work at a desk you should be taking micro pauses to shake out your arms and perform stretches regularly during the day to help with preventing postural problems.

Like any muscle, our postural muscles will become stronger the more they are used, whilst it is helpful to do exercises to specifically strengthen these muscles, trying to maintain good posture for the day at work is a much more functional way of strengthening these areas.

If you would like a program to assist with improving your posture call your local physiotherapist.