Posture: Key to Health

Posture plays a profound role in our capacity for good health, our ability to perform daily activities and in our interaction with others. However, the ideas about what represents good posture and how best to attain it are often fraught with numerous misconceptions. Recall some of the exhortations we have all heard over our lives from our parents, teachers, coaches, drill sergeants and therapists: "Shoulders back!" "Chin up!" "Stand up straight!" "Pull your tummy in!"

While these commands are well-intentioned, they often engage superficial rather than deep musculature which short-circuits the capacity to truly sense and understand how your spine can lengthen and your skeleton can support you in movement. Over time, it becomes harder to stand up tall even when pulling your shoulders back and lifting the chin, because other parts begin to compensate for the strain. What is required is an approach that trains you to more efficiently distribute your efforts throughout your entire trunk and pelvis, while enhancing your awareness so you can move with less strain and do the things that are important to you.

A correct understanding of basic anatomy is essential in addressing posture. The spine is not straight, but is composed of three curves: a forward arch in the lumbar and cervical spine and a backward curve in the thoracic spine. When these curves are well-balanced, they help to reduce compression on the spine and vertebral discs, enabling us to stand erect. At the top of the spine is the head which is designed to balance lightly on top of the spine; at the base of the spine is the pelvis which transmits the weight of our trunk into our hip joints and the legs.

Good posture requires you to be able to control motion at both ends of the spine, the pelvis and head, and everything in between. Therefore, one highly effective approach goes to the heart of the matter and teaches you to move from both ends in order to find a neutral and elongated spine. Here is an exercise that engages many areas of the trunk and can help you improve your sitting posture:

Sit on the edge of a firm chair with your feet flat on the floor. Locate your pelvic bones by putting your hands firmly on your waist with your thumbs to the back and other fingers to the front gently cupping the bones in front of the pelvis. 1) Begin to roll your pelvis backwards as you exhale – you should feel your weight shifting towards the back of your buttocks – while allowing the head and shoulders to relax forwards. Your entire spine will be in a C-curve, from head to tailbone. Relax in this posture. Then, 2) inhale and roll your pelvis forwards (you should feel your pelvic bones pushing into your hands) so your low back arches – while lifting the chest and head. Your entire spine should be arched, from tailbone to head. Sense the front of the chest and ribs expanding without collapsing the head too far backwards, as the shoulderblades move in towards each other. 3) Repeat this movement back and forth gently and easily a few times and then gradually reduce how far backwards and forwards you roll each time, until eventually you are perched directly above your sit-bones (the two big bones on the base of your buttocks that you sit upon). Rest your palms on your thighs. Do you now

feel taller? Is there less strain required to sit upright? Is your back less rounded? Is your head closer to the ceiling?

The effect of this movement is to help you mobilize and re-align your pelvis and low back to provide better support for the entire trunk. With this improved support, you can then imagine that the top of your head is gently floating upwards and decompressing the entire spine. As you sit at the computer, can you recall the experience of sitting with ease and length?

Good posture is dynamic and allows you to move with efficiency and control. While other specific exercises to strengthen the interscapular muscles, the pelvis and lumbar spine may also assist in healthy bone development, without the awareness and mobility of the pelvis and spine, the effects of such isolated exercises may be short-lived and attained with unnecessary strain. When you learn to properly lengthen the spine, you will attain a dynamic posture that promotes vitality, supports easy breathing and can respond to the changing demands of your daily life.

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