

STRIKE A POSE

Improving posture is the fastest way to ease back, neck and shoulder pain (as well as look slimmer and fitter). Leading personal trainer Michael Garry reveals the best ways to walk tall.



Cindy Crawford shows the benefits of good posture

It's said that standing up straight instantly takes ten pounds off our visual weight. There's no doubt a healthy posture helps us look more confident, and feel more vibrant and energetic. Cindy Crawford famously posted a pair of pictures, one slouching, the other standing up straight. The difference was remarkable and made the point that posture is key - even for a supermodel. A good posture not only makes us look better, it builds a stronger, more flexible and better balanced body. As leading personal trainer Michael Garry (michaelgarry.com) points out, "We need good posture for standing, sitting, sleeping and, most importantly, when we're exercising and pushing our bodies that bit more. The better our posture, the less our risk of injury, whether an everyday slip or sports-related. Good posture is one of the best ways to keep the body pain-free."

Straight talking

The trend to sit hunched over screens and laptops is a ticking time-bomb in terms of back pain and mobility. Pilates, yoga and the Alexander technique are all very good for changing habitual bad posture. The common thread that runs through all is to start

by focusing on the way we stand, with an 'active stance', being conscious of how we are standing up in the world around us. Start by standing tall (imagine books balanced on top of your head, or try walking with one actually balanced there), draw your shoulders down away from your ears, pull your navel in towards your spine and tuck your chin back so your head is perfectly positioned in line with your body. Keep your weight equally balanced on both feet and evenly distributed from toes to heels, arms hanging loosely by your side. Slightly tilt the base of your spine to maintain the natural curve of the back (called 'neutral spine' in Pilates), just watch you don't stick your bottom out.


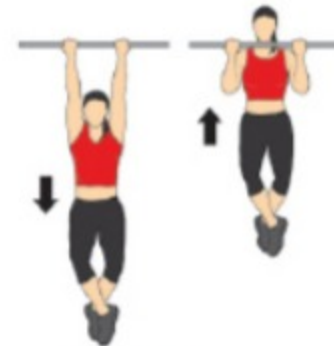
When sitting, keep shoulders pulled down, as this automatically makes us sit up straighter. We spend so much of our lives sitting down - whether it's on our daily commute followed by hours at an office desk, or simply at home on the sofa. Adopting the correct position for work is especially important (see box). Posture even matters in bed - sleeping on our backs with a pillow under the knees for support is best, or adopt the foetal position curled on one side (again, with a knee pillow if needed), with just one firm pillow tucked under the neck to keep the head in line with the spine. 

Image: Shutterstock

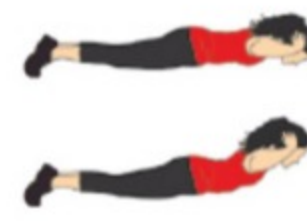
POSTURE PROBLEMS

- Leaning on one leg is a common problem. Over time, this leads to muscle imbalances and strain in the lower back and hip. Other causes of uneven hips include carrying a heavy bag on one shoulder or carrying toddlers around on one hip. Get into the habit of always standing with your weight evenly distributed on both legs - and buy a backpack.
- 'Text neck' is on the rise, as we spend so much of our life hunched over our phones. Avoid leaning your head forward by making a conscious effort to pull your chin back towards the back of the neck. Raise your phone to eye level whenever possible. Strengthen the neck with regular upper back, neck and rear shoulder exercises, such as pull-downs.
- 'Poking chin posture' is just as its name suggests; when our chin juts forward to focus on what's ahead of us (often a computer screen or TV). It can be caused by sitting in a chair that's too low, looking at a screen that is too high, or having a hunched back (or a combination).
- Never, ever hold your phone balanced between your ear and shoulder. This places enormous strain on the muscles in the neck, upper back and shoulders. Even short periods of 'phone neck' can lead to serious problems.

According to Michael Garry, the best exercises to help us sit straight and stand tall are those that help strengthen our core and buttock muscles. These include back extensions (which help correct a slouched sitting position), the plank and bridges. When in the gym, the seated row and the lateral pull-down will both help strengthen the shoulders to keep them back and down. Repeat all exercises pictured here ten times.



1 PULL-UPS
Use a gym or park bar to lift your body so your head is over the bar, keeping your back straight.



2 BACK EXTENSION
Keeping hands behind the ears, pull the shoulders back and down as you lift and lower.



3 PLANK
Keep elbows beneath the armpits, and body in a straight line as you lift and hold. Keep the core strong. Increase length of time held to the count of 60.



4 SHOULDER SHRUGS
Use 2kg weights to start, gradually increasing up to 10kg. Lift and lower the shoulders, keeping tummy pulled in and core strong.



5 NECK TILTS
Stand straight with shoulders pulled down. Tuck chin back and tilt head slowly from side to side, holding each stretch for a count of ten.



6 SIDE PLANK
Keep elbow beneath armpit, legs straight and body in a straight line as you lift and hold, keeping the core strong. Increase length of time held to the count of 60.



7 PULL-DOWNS
In the gym, sit up tall, tummy in and core strong. Use the backs of the shoulders to pull down, gradually increasing the weight as you gain strength.



8 SEATED ROW
In the gym or using a resistance band at home, sit up tall with tummy pulled in, shoulders down and core strong. Pull elbows back in line with armpits. Gradually increase resistance if working with weighted gym equipment.

Well at work

How we sit at our computers is very important. Adjust your seat so your feet are flat on the floor (use a foot rest if necessary). Link your laptop to a separate monitor screen at eye level to avoid having to look down and strain the neck. Keep your chair pulled under your desk so you can rest your forearms on the desk. Enlarging your computer's font to make text easier to read is a simple way to avoid peering forward at the screen. Take regular breaks to get up and walk around, stretching out arms, shoulders and hands.

