

WELLBEING: Don't be such a slouch

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Do you know what it feels like to stand with good posture? Our grandparents knew the value of standing tall, and now science is catching up. In *Slouch at Your Own Peril: Hunching at Work Leads to Hunching All the Time*, the Wall Street Journal reported on new studies showing what chiropractors and orthopaedic surgeons know: posture is the 363kg gorilla of health and wellness.

With more of us developing a permanent slump from sitting at a computer, using smartphones and texting, posture is gaining new recognition as a growing problem.

Sitting is a bent posture, literally folding the torso over the pelvis. Texting locks the hands together causing the shoulders to roll inward. The combination means chronically tight back, neck and chest muscles. Plus, as we age, gravity combines with muscle imbalances to make people feel and look older than they are.

If you spend your day with folded posture, suffer with back pain or aching shoulders and neck, you may want to do some work re-balancing your body. First, learn how to stand tall. Retraining posture requires us to stretch tight areas and strengthen neglected ones. Look at how you interact with your seated, standing and sleeping environments.

Posture reality check

To observe what the world sees when you think you're standing straight, take a picture of yourself. Just stand tall, and snap a few from the front, back and side.

How to stand tall

When most people try to "fix their posture" they pull their shoulders back. The problem is they can't hold the position for more than a minute, which is just as well because they're nearly always doing more harm than good.

When you pull your shoulders back your head juts into forward head posture (FHP). Known as tech-neck, it's caused by too much texting and typing. You want to first stabilise the pelvis. Repositioning only the shoulders makes body alignment worse.

Your body is accustomed to moving the way it's been trained, so the challenge begins with learning what stronger alignment feels like. Posture is about balance, not just about being straight. It is the sum of what you are doing with each part of your body individually – head and shoulders, belly and hips – to keep from falling down.

The key to improving posture is to align each body region. Muscle stress and joint strain are reduced when the head is well balanced over the torso, the torso over the pelvis and the pelvis over the feet. Like a stack



Sitting at a computer all day can misalign the spine. Photo/file

of children's blocks in a tower, better alignment strengthens stability and control, and reduces the risk of injury.

Next is retraining your body's perception to true reality. Yoga practitioners teach this kind of mind-body focus, but you can start with this five-step exercise taught by posture expert, Dr Steven Weiniger and posture specialists globally.

Five steps to standing taller

Focus and take one slow, deep breath during each of these steps:

1. Stand Tall: Not stiff. Relax, and lengthen or float your head toward the ceiling.
2. Ground your feet: Slowly come up on to your toes, then heels. Roll your feet out, then in. Press all four corners of your feet into the ground.
3. Centre your pelvis: Arch your lower back then tuck your pelvis under. Find the centre point as you lengthen your spine.
- 4 Open your torso: Lift shoulders and roll them back. Keep your neck lengthened and head tall as you pull your shoulders back down.
5. Level your head: Look straight ahead, and tuck your chin slightly to keep it level. Continue to focus on standing taller as you take each slow breath, being aware of each posture zone. Repeat two or three times a day, and don't be surprised when you feel lighter and your chest feels more open. After a few weeks others will also notice a difference.

Your sitting posture environment

Improve your seated environment by being aware of your alignment. An expensive ergonomic chair is a waste when it's not adjusted to keep you aligned. Pay extra attention to the tilt of your pelvis. It's the base you sit on. A forward tilt helps align the pelvis squarely under the torso for best mechanics in the lumbar spine and discs.

Many better designed chairs have adjustments for this, plus there are affordable sit-on supports to optimise how the pelvis is cradled. Back supports you lean against haven't been shown to help long-term, and some believe these may hold the spine in a curve without engaging the muscles needed to stay tall.

Posture is an under-appreciated aspect of health you can do something about. Now's the perfect time for a posture reality check. Begin working to improve with the steps outlined above and start standing and sitting taller to look better and feel younger.

Dr Steven Weiniger, posture expert, speaker and author, lectures globally on improving posture for longevity, health, pain relief and ageing well.

– [Bay of Plenty Times](#)