

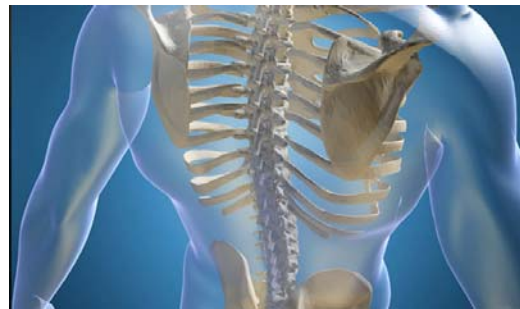
The Posture Article

From Tnation by Geoff Girvitz – 8/19/2011



Many of the articles on this site are about looking good in the short-term. I'm going to help you look good in the long-term by mixing together some information on musculoskeletal health with a good dose of evolutionary biology.

As a species we often take a shorthand approach to processing information. Determining whether another person is attractive relies upon highly-developed visual-perception circuits. These circuits rapidly process a number of clues about a potential mate's status. They run through a rapid-fire series of questions and answers. Young? Strong? Fertile? Likely to win a knife fight? All of these form a Cliffs Notes-style summary of their genes.



Yet, for as long as civilization has existed, we've been hacking this process.

We emphasize, augment, or sometimes downright lie about the qualities that other people may find attractive in us. We're not here to talk about flashy cars or hair extensions, though. And while we are going to talk about health, it's not going to be as it directly pertains to muscle mass or body fat. We're going to talk about an effect that will become even more pronounced as you age.

Posture.

You thought that this topic was going to be sexier, right? Well, it's going to make *you* sexier so stick around.

Nobody really takes posture into account other than schoolmarms and specialists. However, if you want your post-retirement nickname to be *The Silver Fox* instead of *Old Droopy*, you should be adding your name to that list.

Posture is a significant indicator of youth, vitality and mental state. And all of those things feed into the subconscious list of attractive qualities that others seek. According to Professor Geoffrey Miller, author of *The Mating Mind* and *Spent*, good **posture can increase apparent health and fitness in several ways:**

1. increased height, which is especially attractive in males
2. increased youthfulness, as people tend to slump with age
3. increased energy level, as tired people slump

4. increased mental health, as depressed people slump

Studies have also shown **improved posture to have an immediate effect on confidence.**

Traditionally, horrible posture has not been a factor for most people until they're in their autumn years. That is no longer the case. Posture is getting worse (and this issue is becoming amplified by age).

I'll say it again: our posture is collectively going to shit.

My friend, fitness hot-shot Alwyn Cosgrove, has used a wide method of postural assessment tools over the past decade and, according to him, "The movement quality we see in people walking in off the street now is significantly worse than it was 10 years ago."

If you want a quick idea of what posture looks like, sit yourself down in a café with a lot of pedestrian traffic outside. Use anterior head carriage as your go-to criterion (the middle of the ear should, in theory, be in-line with the middle of the shoulder).

The first thing you should do is narrow your gaze to everyone over the age of 50. Why? Because these are people who have likely been stuck behind desks since childhood. They've slumped just a little more every single day for the better part of five decades. The result is that they show their age through the degenerative changes to their spines. This is a fair baseline for compromised posture. It's not inevitable, but it's very likely for sedentary people.

Now look at everyone between the ages of 20-25. At least half of these people will probably have posture that's as bad (or worse) than the first group.

Why?

People have been stuck behind desks for as long as there have been desks. That's a problem but it's not the real problem. A fella's gotta make a living, after all.

The *real* problem is that after most people finish at the office, they get up, walk over to the next computer and sit down again. They no longer head off to chop wood, repair boats, or build houses. Instead, they rush home to hit Facebook, hit the Xbox or watch videos of guys doing stupid things.

Lifestyle isn't the only factor here. We know that the amount of time schoolchildren spend in front of computers has been on the rise ever since scientists figured out how to squeeze a computer onto a desktop.

An Australian study from over a decade ago smartly linked the head angle of a wee one looking up at a screen to musculoskeletal strain. What we can also reasonably expect is that some of those habits – such as sitting with your chin jammed forward (amplifying the stress on your cervical spine dramatically) stick with us.

The human body wasn't designed to be stuck in any one position for very long. When it is stuck in a position for a long time, a number of adaptive changes take place that result in impaired posture.

However, you don't need to hear about the myriad ways that poor posture will impact your athletic performance or risk of injury. There's no shortage of information available on this topic. What you should be aware of is that the slumped-over position that facilitates high scores in World of Warcraft facilitates very little scoring in the real world.

If you're interested in looking and performing better by improving your posture, here are some tips:

Control + Reset + Default

Before you try to establish what your ideal seated posture is, I recommend beginning with a tall kneel. This will remove some of the confounding factors in terms of how knees or pelvic alignment may affect your default position. Our goal here is to determine what neutral spine looks like for you.

If you use a mirror for the following series of postural checks (which is a good idea), try turning to the side so you can see yourself in profile. This will give you a clearer idea of what your back alignment is like.

To establish a tall kneel, get on your knees and squeeze your glutes together like there's a thousand dollar bill stuck in there. If you feel tightness toward the front (the portion of your upper-leg just below the pelvis), that's probably your hip flexors kicking and screaming because they've become shortened from long periods of sitting. Some soft-tissue and mobility work would be great.

Assuming that you're not facing any serious soft-tissue restrictions, you should find yourself upright and with your hips in a fairly neutral position. Remember that your job is to be as tall as possible – not as arched as possible.

Once you've established your base, you'll be ready to build on top of it.

Chest Up, Ribs Forward

"Chest up!" is a very common weightroom cue designed to get you to stop rounding your lower back. It might be more accurate to say "ribs forward." If we follow the natural curve of the lumbar spine, we can help preserve or restore it by trying to drive your lats forward through the ribs. You'll do just this to build proper lumbar spine alignment on top of your neutral pelvis.

Shoulders Back

Squeeze your shoulder blades together for a moment before letting them settle. Repeat this process a few times until you feel the range of motion improve. From there, rotate your thumbs to the outside (bringing your thumbs to the front and beyond). Relax and repeat this motion a few times as well.

Now that you've reminded your central nervous system what a full range of motion actually feels like, it should be easier to default to a neutral position. To achieve this, retract your shoulder blades and turn your arms out one last time. Now, allow them to relax slightly. They don't have to be in a pinned-back position; just neutral.

You may notice that having your chest up (from the previous step) makes it easier to keep the shoulders from falling forward. If you imagine yourself standing on a hill, looking down, it's easy to understand why your shoulders are more likely to fall forward when your shoulders and upper back are rounded.

Neck Packed

I think we can safely credit physiotherapist Charlie Weingroff with popularizing the term "neck packing." If you want to know what packing the neck means, the process begins with getting tall.

People often make the mistake of tilting the head too far forward or too far backward. Instead, elevate the crown of your head as high as possible without decapitating yourself. From there, allow gravity to gently (gently!) pull your chin down. If you grab your sternocleidomastoid (the ropes of muscle tissue located at 10:00 and 2:00 on your neck), you shouldn't feel any tension as you bring your head into position. That's a job for the deep neck flexors, not the sternocleidomastoids.

Breathe!

Do you:

1. breathe?
2. breathe *well*?

Most non-zombies should answer yes to at least the first question. However, you'd be surprised how many people fail at the second part. This is unfortunate because the way you breathe can have a profound effect on posture.



Breathing well means using the diaphragm. Ask anyone and they'll tell you the same thing. However, there's telling and then there's doing. Doing (on the regular) will make it dramatically easier to maintain good posture. Breathing is something that you can work on right now.

Get Ready for Action

There are differing opinions on optimal sitting angle. The status quo these days is between 120 and 135 degrees, which is a fairly significant lean backwards. I'm going to make a different suggestion – that your default sitting position should resemble a (good) front squat. What does this mean?

The advantage to leaning back like a smug boss is that it's easier to prevent flexion of the lumbar spine and sacroiliac joint. However, this position has very little relationship to any form of standing movement.

It also tends to encourage that anterior head carriage that leads us to trouble. On the other hand, putting yourself in a position to stand (this is without rocking forward or otherwise using momentum) helps ensure engagement of the core muscles required for good posture.

To achieve this position, lower yourself into a squat until you're lightly touching the chair). Your weight should be toward your heels and you should feel no stress on your knees. From here, slowly sink your weight onto the chair until your muscles are only slightly engaged. Work on keeping the ribcage pushed forward. You'll notice that your core is engaged, your neck is packed, and that you'll feel ready to stand.

It's hard to get lazy about core activation when you're ready for action. That's good. Just remember not to let your lower-back round.

Now Go Get Some Action

Regardless of what you do when you're not working, make sure that you stand up, reach for the sky or simply walk around every 10-20 minutes. This will help you overcome some of the adaptations that your body makes to sitting. It will help you move better, feel better and look better. These are all essential traits for anyone who wants to let the world know that their genes are worth chasing.

References

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