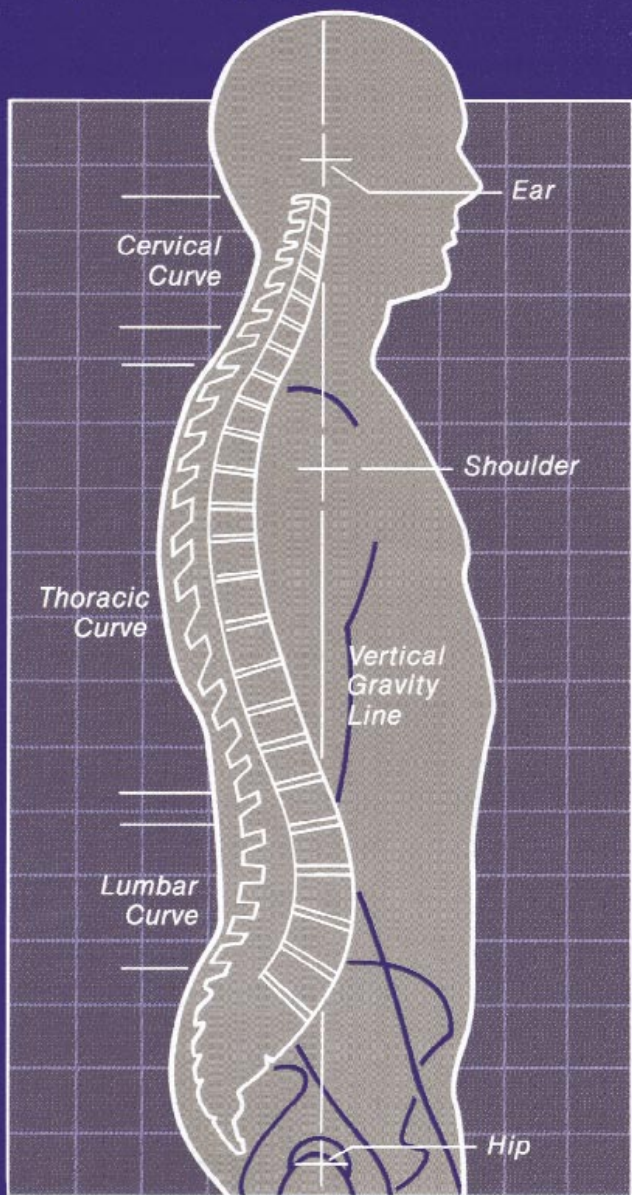


The Secret of

GOOD POSTURE

A Physical Therapist's Perspective



American Physical Therapy Association

The Secret...

The American Physical Therapy Association would like to share a secret with you. It can help you do more with less effort... breathe easier... feel great.

The secret is about good posture, which can be an important part of the quality of your life. This brochure offers some valuable information about good posture, including steps for checking your own posture.

Learn how good posture can help you walk proud and stand tall.

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This brochure is not intended as a substitute for professional health care.

“Stand up straight! Don’t slouch!”

How many times did you hear those scolding words while growing up? Maybe more times than you would like to remember.

Behind those long forgotten words lies a very valuable and surprisingly simple message: *Good posture is important because it helps your body function at top speed. It promotes movement efficiency and endurance and contributes to an overall feeling of well-being.*

Good posture is also good prevention. If you have poor posture, your bones are not properly aligned, and your muscles, joints, and ligaments take more strain than nature intended. Faulty posture may cause you fatigue, muscular strain, and, in later stages, pain. Many individuals with chronic back pain can trace their problems to years of faulty postural habits. In addition, poor posture can affect the position and function of your vital organs, particularly those in the abdominal region.

Good posture also contributes to good appearance; the person with good posture projects poise, confidence, and dignity.

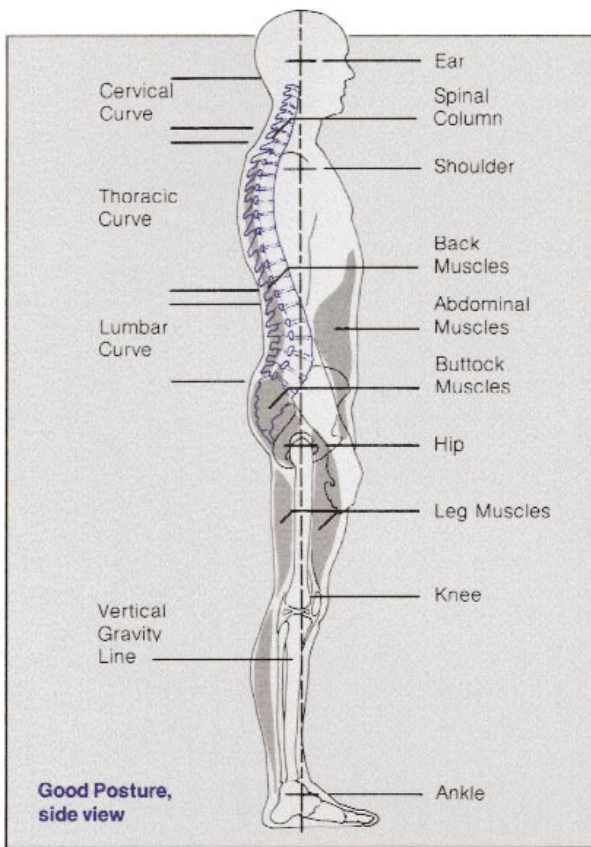
The Anatomy of Good Posture

To have good posture, it is essential that your *back, muscles, and joints* be in tip-top shape.

Your Back. A healthy back has three natural curves: a slight forward curve in the neck (cervical curve), a slight backward curve in the upper back (thoracic curve), and a slight forward curve in the low back (lumbar curve). *Good posture* actually means keeping these three curves in balanced alignment.

Your Muscles. Strong and flexible muscles also are essential to good posture. Abdominal, hip, and leg muscles that are weak and inflexible cannot support your back's natural curves.

Your Joints. Hip, knee, and ankle joints balance your back's natural curves when you move, making it possible to maintain good posture in any position.



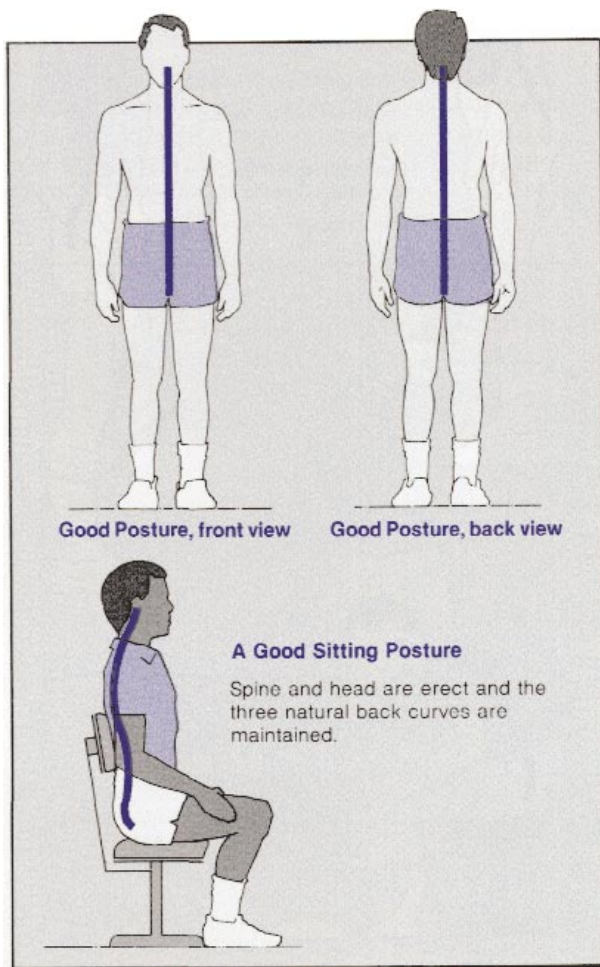
A View of Good Posture

Good posture—when you are standing—is straight vertical alignment of your body from the top of your head, through your body's center, to the bottom of your feet.

From a side view, good posture can be seen as an imaginary vertical line through the ear, shoulder, hip, knee, and ankle. In addition, the three natural curves in your back can be seen.

From a back view, the spine and head are straight, not curved to the right or left.

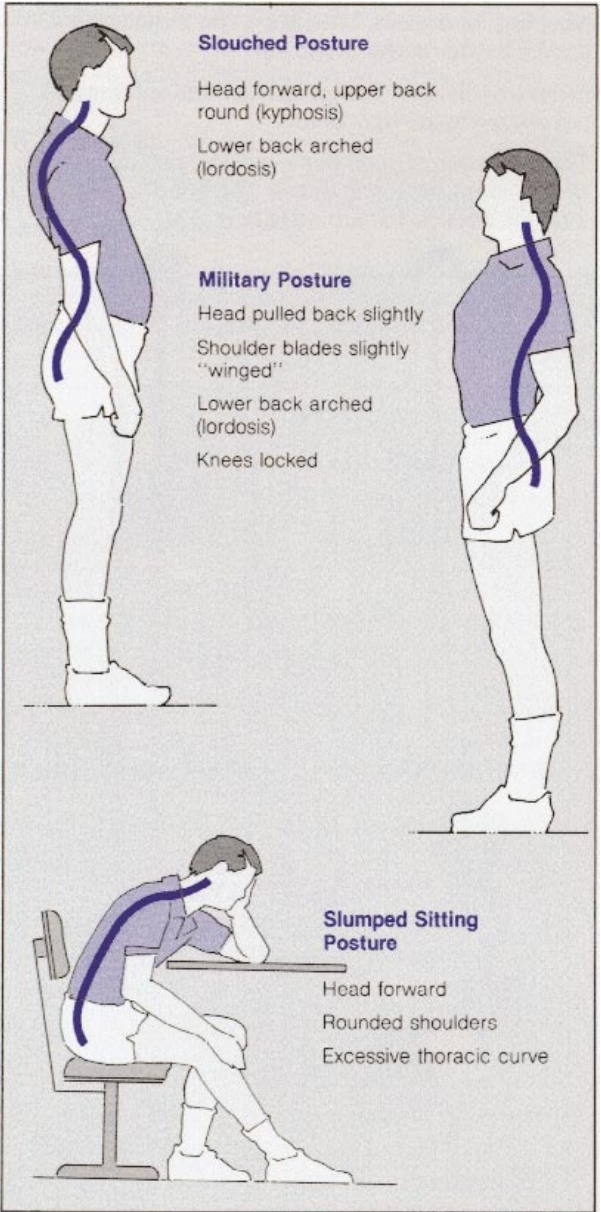
The front view of good posture shows equal heights of shoulders, hips, and knees. The head is held straight, not tilted or turned to one side.



Poor Posture

Poor posture distorts the body's proper vertical alignment and the back's natural curves.

Good posture only has one appearance, but poor posture comes in many unattractive styles.



Check Your Posture

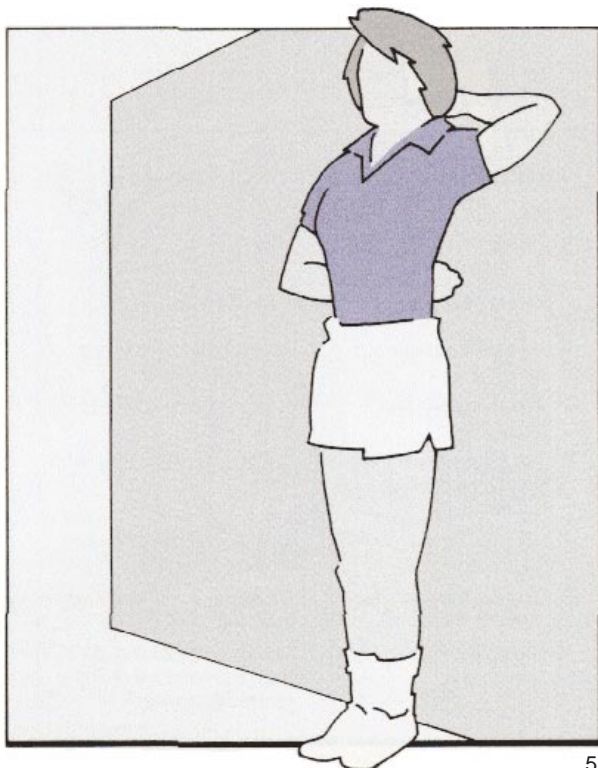
The best way to check your posture is to receive a thorough postural evaluation from a physical therapist. Physical therapists have special skills to evaluate and treat postural problems.

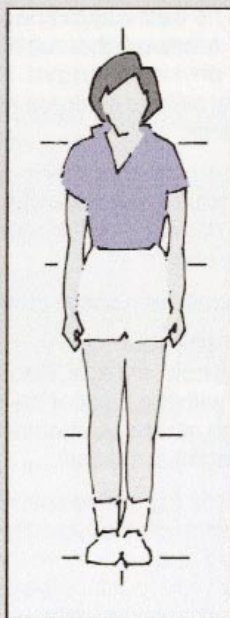
To determine if a professional evaluation may be necessary, you can evaluate your own posture to some degree. For this you need a wall and a full-length mirror.

To check for normal curves of the spine:

Stand with your back to a wall, heels about three inches from the wall. Place one hand behind your neck, with the back of the hand against the wall, and the other hand behind your low back with the palm against the wall.

If there is excessive space between your back and the wall, such that you can easily move your hands forward and back more than one inch, some adjustment in your posture may be necessary to restore the normal curves of your spine.





To check your posture from a front view:

Stand directly in front of a full-length mirror and answer the following questions:

Good Posture

1. Is your head held straight?
2. Are your shoulders level?
3. Are the spaces between your arms and sides equal?
4. Are your hips level?
5. Do your kneecaps face straight ahead?
6. Are your ankles straight?

Poor Posture

- Is your head tilted to one side or the other?
- Is one shoulder lower than the other?
- Are the spaces unequal?
- Is one hip higher than the other?
- Do either of your knees turn in or out?
- Do your ankles roll in so that your weight is on the inside of your feet?

To check your posture from a side view:

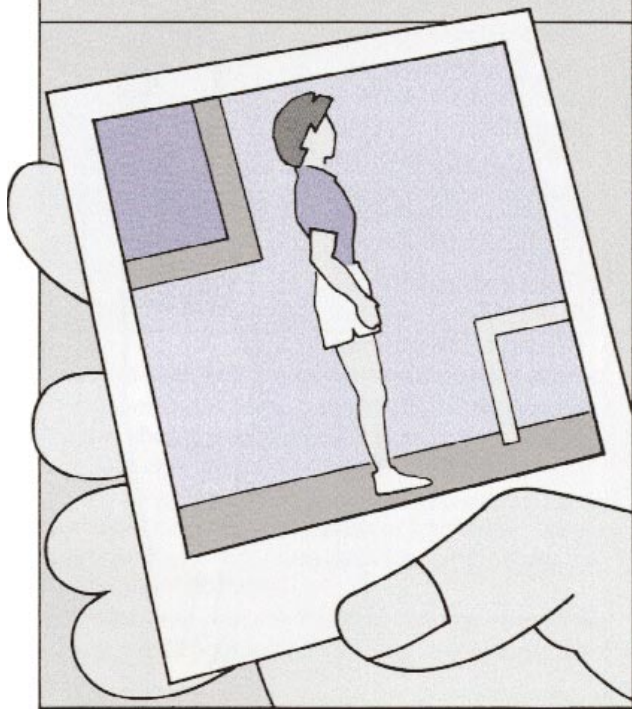
The best way to check your posture from a side view is to have a friend photograph you in this position and to evaluate the photograph by answering the following questions:

Good Posture

1. Is your head held erect?
2. Is your chin parallel to the floor?
3. Are your shoulders in line with your ears?
4. Is your chest held moderately elevated and the upper back erect?
5. Is your abdominal wall (tummy) flat?
6. Does your lower back appear to have a slight forward curve?
7. Are your knees straight?

Poor Posture

- Does your head slump forward?
- Does your chin tilt up with the head held back?
- Are your shoulders drooped forward or pulled back?
- Is your chest sunken-in and your upper back rounded?
- Does your abdomen sag?
- Is your lower back too flat (no gentle curve) or does it curve forward into a hollow back?
- Do your knees bend forward or are they thrown backward into a locked position?



You Can Improve or Maintain Your Posture

The best way to improve or maintain your posture is to *always practice good posture*, when sitting, standing, or moving.

Practicing good posture is not always as easy as it sounds, especially for some of us who have forgotten what good posture feels like. The following two exercises can help bring back that good posture feeling.

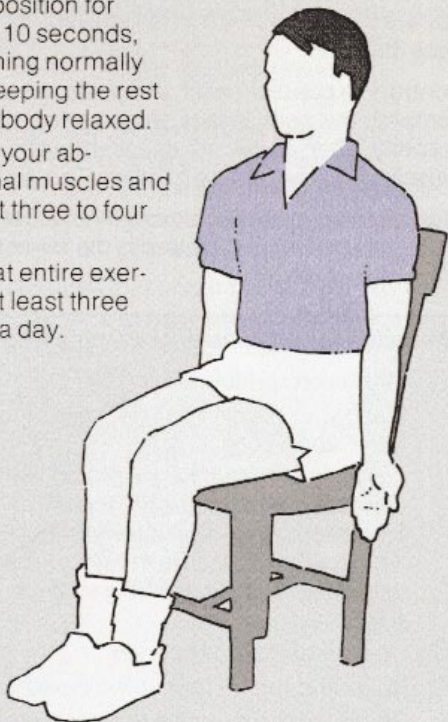
Standing Position

- Stand with your back against a wall, heels about three inches from the wall and feet about six inches apart; weight should be evenly distributed.
- Place arms at your sides, palms forward.
- Keep ankles straight and kneecaps facing front.
- Keep your low back close to the wall.
- Straighten the upper back, lifting the chest and bringing shoulders back against the wall.
- Bring head back to touch the wall while keeping the chin tucked in as if a string is attached to the middle of the back of your head pulling it back.
- Pull up and in with the muscles in the lower abdomen, trying to flatten the abdomen.*
- Hold position for about 10 seconds, breathing normally.
- Relax and repeat three to four times.
- Repeat entire exercise at least three times a day for optimum results.



Sitting Position

- Sit in a straight back armless chair, with both feet flat on the floor and back resting against the chair.
- Place arms at your sides, palms forward.
- Straighten the upper back, lifting the chest.
- Bring shoulders back against the chair.
- Hold head erect.
- Pull up and in with the muscles in the lower abdomen, trying to flatten the abdomen.*
- Hold position for about 10 seconds, breathing normally and keeping the rest of the body relaxed.
- Relax your abdominal muscles and repeat three to four times.
- Repeat entire exercise at least three times a day.



Tips for maintaining good posture while sitting:

- Sit with back firmly against chair; chair should be low enough to allow placement of both feet on the floor with knees slightly higher than hips.
- Keep your head up and avoid leaning forward. If you work long hours at a desk or typewriter, keep your chair close-in to the desk top to help maintain your upright position.
- If you feel your low back arching forward while sitting, cross your legs or put your feet up on a stool.

Other Exercises You Can Do

Only after a complete postural evaluation as provided by a physical therapist can you identify your particular postural problems. At that time you may be given specific exercises to correct them.

One problem common to most people with poor posture is weakness of the *lower* abdominal muscles. If your lower abdomen sags and bulges, you can be sure the muscles there are weak. The best way to strengthen these muscles is to participate in an exercise that isolates and actively uses them.

Contrary to popular belief, sit-ups do not always accomplish this goal. In fact, sit-ups, when done improperly, often cause unnecessary strain on back muscles and may cause additional complications.

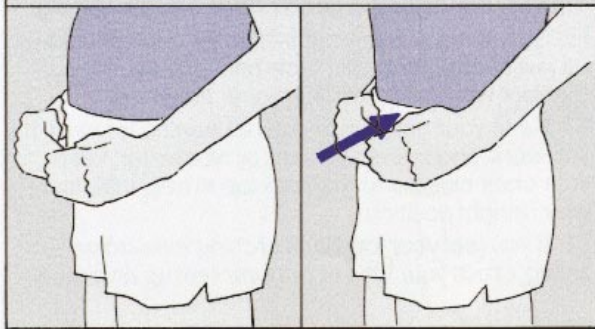
The following exercise, although not as vigorous as a sit-up, is perfect for tightening the lower abdominal muscles.

Exercise for the Lower Abdominal Muscles

- Stand comfortably.
- Clasp your hands and cup them around your lower abdomen.
- Pull up and in with the lower abdominal muscles, drawing in the abdomen.*

This step isolates and strengthens the abdominal muscles. To locate the right muscles it might help to think of hiding your tummy under your chest.

- Hold for about 10 seconds.
- Relax and repeat four to five times.
- Repeat entire exercise at least three times a day.



Good Posture For Life

Changes occur naturally in your body as you grow older. These changes can influence your posture and make it more difficult to maintain a good posture or correct a poor posture.

Some of the physical changes that occur:

- The disks between the spinal segments become less resilient and give in more readily to external forces, such as gravity and body weight.
- Muscles become less flexible.
- Compression and deterioration of the spine, commonly seen in individuals with osteoporosis, cause an increased flexed, or bent forward, posture.
- Lifestyles usually become more sedentary. Sitting for long periods of time shortens various muscles, which results in the body being pulled into poor postural positions, and stretches and weakens other muscles, which allows the body to slump.

Despite the changes that occur naturally with aging, good posture can be maintained and, for many, poor posture improved. In individuals with severe postural problems, such as poor alignments that have existed so long that structural changes have occurred, the poor posture can be kept from getting progressively worse.

In any case, all of us must consciously work at achieving and maintaining good posture as we grow older.

Tips for Maintaining Good Posture Throughout Your Life

- Throughout each day, concentrate on keeping your three natural back curves in balanced alignment.
- Keep your weight down; excess weight exerts a constant forward pull on the back muscles and stretches and weakens muscles in the abdomen.
- Avoid staying in one position for long periods of time; inactivity causes muscle tension and weakness.
- Sleep on a firm mattress and use a pillow under your head just big enough to maintain the normal cervical—neck—curve. Avoid use of oversized or several pillows.
- Exercise regularly; exercise promotes strong and flexible muscles that keep you upright in a proper postural position.
- Protect your back by using good body mechanics; bend your knees when picking something up or putting it down; carry a heavy object by using two hands and keeping the load close to your waist.
- Wear comfortable and well-supported shoes. Avoid continuous use of high-heeled or platform shoes, which distort the normal shape of the foot and throw the back's natural curves out of alignment.
- Walk with good posture; keep head erect with chin parallel to the ground, allow arms to swing naturally, and keep feet pointed in the direction you are going.

Get in on the secret. Start your posture perfect program today.

If you already have good posture, congratulations! Give this brochure to a friend and share the secret. *Good Posture... pass it on!*

About APTA

The American Physical Therapy Association (APTA) is a national professional organization that represents members throughout the United States. The goal of the American Physical Therapy Association is to promote excellence in physical therapy practice, research, and education.

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Acknowledgements

Annette Iglarsh, PT, PhD
Florence Kendall, PT
Carole Lewis, PT, PhD
Shirley Sahrman, PT, PhD

Prepared as a public service by the



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