

The Alexander technique

This aims to treat and prevent a range of disorders by improving posture. The technique is based on the principle of relaxing muscles – the neck and shoulder muscles particularly – and of adopting the posture that puts least stress on your spine.

An Australian actor, F. Matthias Alexander, developed this technique after suddenly and inexplicably losing his voice during performances. He discovered that, just before delivering a speech

on stage, he pulled his head backwards and downwards in a manner which cut off his voice. He realized that posture exerts a constant influence on both physiology and psychology.

A qualified teacher will help you undo all the postural habits that have become second nature. All pupils are taught techniques developed specifically for their own posture, which should be practised everyday. The course may involve just five or six lessons over a few weeks or it can last up to a year.

The Alexander technique

The Alexander teacher will help you to eliminate postural defects by studying the way you sit, stand and move. The teacher will tailor a lesson to your unique posture and she may work with you sitting, standing or lying, depending on what she feels is required. She may start by helping you sit and stand up. You will be encouraged to imagine that you are being pulled upwards from the crown of your head.

Sitting posture

The teacher will help you to achieve good sitting posture by encouraging the right amount of curve in your lower and mid back and neck.



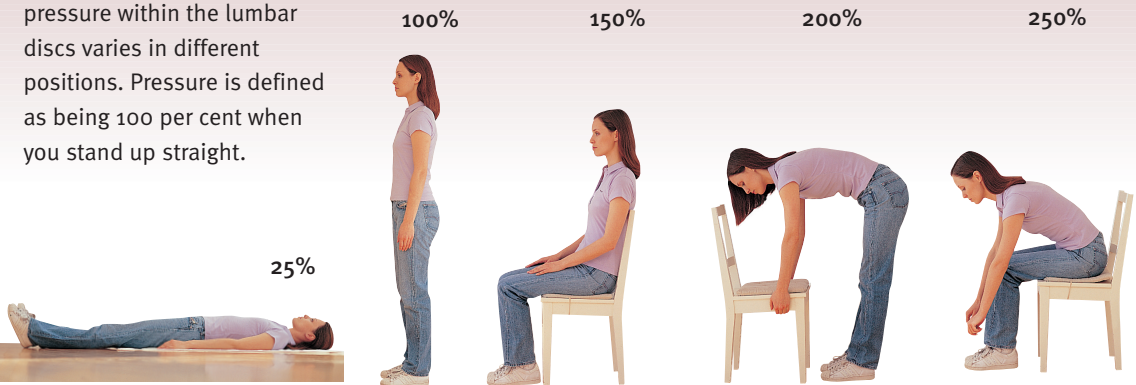
Standing up

The teacher will show you how to keep your spine straight when you stand up rather than leaning forwards and pulling your head back.



Pressure on the spine

These postures show how the pressure within the lumbar discs varies in different positions. Pressure is defined as being 100 per cent when you stand up straight.



A course will not cure acute problems such as a disc prolapse or stuck facet joints. However, once an acute attack is over, the technique helps to prevent a recurrence. It is especially useful for avoiding postural pain, and in elderly people it may prevent acute episodes of back pain by teaching them to use their backs properly.

Sitting posture

You increase the stress on your back if you spend long hours sitting every day. The figures above (from a chart by Alf Nachemson, an eminent researcher on back pain) tell the story.

Sitting imposes more strain on the spine than standing or walking. As soon as you lean forwards more than a few degrees the pressure increases dramatically. If you must sit down for a long time, use a comfortable, well-designed chair to reduce the risk of developing either back or neck pain and a headache (see p. 145).

Some people find leaning forwards is most comfortable for their back, providing that they

lean on their hands, as if riding a motorcycle. Others prefer to lean on their elbows, as when sitting on a Balans chair (see p. 144).

Sitting at a desk

If you work at a computer keyboard, keep your seat horizontal and support your lower back. To avoid stress in your shoulders and neck, the height of the desk or table should allow your fingers to touch the keys with your arms bent just slightly below the horizontal. Alternatively, adjust your chair to that height. For those prone to pain in the lower back, keep your chair at the correct height for the length of your legs. Sit close enough to the keyboard to work without having to stretch your arms forwards from the shoulders. Finally, change position regularly and take breaks.

An ergonomically designed chair should be adjustable in height and able to tilt downwards to let you lean forwards and to tilt backwards so you can relax. The backrest should be adjustable – the best ones tilt forwards or backwards according to the angle of the seat.