

Standing posture

In a good standing posture, your muscles will be relaxed without being slack, and the spine itself is gently S-shaped. However, there is no single ideal posture, since people come in all shapes and sizes. The ideal posture for you is one in which your back is put under the least strain, and in which the spine is curved naturally and gracefully.

The essence of good posture is fitness – if you can keep your muscles well toned and supple, you stand a good chance of achieving the correct posture for you. This is especially true if you can reinforce the posture with a relaxed mental and emotional state.

How to avoid bad posture

In the context of back pain, bad posture is one that puts your spine under unnecessary strain. Although by “poor posture” we generally mean slack posture, an excessively rigid posture can be equally bad for the back (*see below*). This results in tense muscles and may even restrict your breathing. It is not surprising that soldiers faint sometimes when they stand to attention for any length of time.

If you suffer from aching shoulders and neck, try to relax these muscles, and do not adopt a rigid stance. If you are carrying a lot of weight in front, the stress on your spine is increased, not only because your pelvis is tilted forwards unnaturally

but also because your centre of gravity is moved further forwards. As a consequence, the back muscles have to work harder, which increases the compression in the lower back.

It is important to strengthen your abdominal muscles and, if possible, to lose weight. If you are overweight and cannot easily go on a diet, try to increase the amount of exercise you take, perhaps by walking or cycling to work rather than driving, or climbing stairs rather than taking the elevator. Do not be tempted to use a corset – it is no substitute for taking exercise.

If you are pregnant, try to hold yourself as well as possible and make sure the surfaces where you work are adjusted to the right height (*see p. 150*), so that you do not have to stoop. Avoid wearing high heels, which can lead to a hollow back even when you are not pregnant.

Standing correctly

A major feature of the overweight or slack (sway back) posture is that the pelvis is tilted forwards, which produces a hollow back (*see left*). Try to tuck in your pelvis at every opportunity (*see right*). This movement involves consciously setting your pelvis at the correct angle so your lower back has a normal, slight curve, rather than an unnatural, hollowed-out appearance which puts the lower back under stress.

When you are busy or distracted it is easy to forget to tuck in your pelvis all the time. When you are standing, try to rest one of your feet on a low stool or foot-rail about 10 to 15cm (4 to 6in) above the floor. This relaxes the psoas muscle (*see p. 18*), which stretches from the lower back over the pelvis to the thigh, thus altering the angle between the lower back and the pelvis. You can easily use this simple technique at work and in the home and you will find that it relieves stress with no undue muscular effort.

Standing pelvic tilt

If your bad postural habits are deeply ingrained, you may find this exercise hard to begin with, but persevere. You could try it lying down at first (*see p 117*). Regularly practise the movement below and concentrate on getting the correct pelvic angle. When you can do this easily, try it without the wall and with your legs straight.

Correct pelvic angle

1 Stand with your back to a wall, so that the hollow is clearly defined.

2 With your shoulders against the wall, bend your knees slightly and flatten your lower back to the wall by tightening your abdominal muscles and drawing your pubic bone forwards at the same time.

Recognizing poor posture

In one type of poor posture, the muscles are very rigid and the spine is held too stiff and straight (*near right*). In sway back posture, the muscles are too slack and the spine has exaggerated curves (*far right*). If the rigid posture looks uptight and aggressive, the sway back posture looks hangdog and submissive. Sway back is common among overweight people.

Rigid posture

The traditional military-style posture (*left*), with the back stiff and straight and the chest out, is fatiguing and restricts normal breathing. It produces a lot of muscle tension around the neck, shoulder, mid and lower back areas and restricts the upper abdominal muscles and diaphragm.

Sway back

In sway back, the head and chin hang low and the neck pokes forwards (*right*). The upper back and shoulders are rounded. The muscles supporting the spinal column and abdomen are slack.