

Exercises to Improve Your Posture

Stand Taller, Look 10 Pounds Thinner

-- By Glenn Kent, PhD, Certified Personal Trainer

If the eyes are the windows to the soul, then posture is a lens to our health. Sit and stand with proper posture and you will physically look 10 years younger—and 10 pounds lighter. Psychologically, good posture conveys confidence, poise and leadership.

Unfortunately, few of us exhibit good posture, let alone perfect posture. In fact, poor posture often develops so gradually that you may notice its symptoms (back and neck pain, tightness and stiffness, increased injury and losses in your normal range of motion) long before you notice your shoulders hunching over.

Luckily, you can correct your posture by incorporating some simple exercises and stretches into your workout program.

Proper Posture Defined

Good posture results when the muscles of the body align properly, allowing for efficient movement. When your body's muscles and joints are balanced and supported properly, you're better able to perform everyday activities, such as squatting to pick up laundry or running down a flight of stairs efficiently.

When you are poorly aligned, the joints in your body (e.g., shoulders, spine, hips, knees and ankles) do not fit together properly. This causes some muscles to work harder than others. Over time, those muscles become tense while the others weaken, creating muscular imbalances that slowly devolve into poor posture. As posture deteriorates further, joint movements become restricted and the differences between tense and weak muscles places greater stress on your joints, which then have to compensate. This causes pain, stiffness and loss of motion throughout the body. But fix these imbalances, and your posture (and the pain associated with it) will improve.

A qualified personal trainer can provide information about your posture by observing it during a comprehensive fitness assessment. In many cases, a plumb line hanging from the ceiling can be used as a vertical line of reference. The trainer can position you along this vertical reference point. Ideally, the vertical cord should line up with your ear, shoulder, hip, knee and ankle. More often than not, our posture does not fall perfectly along this perfect vertical line—even if you are reasonably healthy and fit.

Improve Your Posture in 4 Steps

So what can you do to improve your posture? Your personal trainer may recommend specific exercises for you, based on the findings of your postural assessment. But even without the aid of a trainer, you can work to improve your posture by adding corrective strengthening and stretching exercises to your fitness program. Perform the exercises and stretches listed below 2-3 times a week for 15-20 minutes per session. Remember to breathe steadily and hold stretches for a minimum of 15-20 seconds. For strengthening exercises, perform 2-3 sets of 8-12 repetitions using good form and technique.

Step 1: Strengthen Your Core

Good posture starts with a strong core, which includes the abdominals (both the rectus abdominals that form the "6-pack" and the deeper transverse abdominals below them), lower back, obliques and hips. Strong core muscles don't just keep your back healthy and resistant to pain and injury; they also hold your body upright, improve balance and enable you to move your body with greater control and efficiency. If any (or all) of your core muscles are weak, other muscles have to compensate, resulting in loss of motion, weakness and pain. In fact, you can alleviate and prevent low-back pain through regular core training.

Sample exercises that strengthen these core muscles:

- [Basic crunches](#) (rectus abdominals) (and other variations of the crunch, as long as you're avoiding full sit-ups)
- [Side plank](#) (obliques)
- [Crunches with twist](#) (abs, obliques)
- [Standing side bends](#) (obliques)

- [Plank hold](#) (transverse abdominals) Note that any isometric core exercise will also work these deep muscles, as will many Pilates exercises.
- [Back extensions](#) (lower back)
- [Slow swimming \(bird dogs\) on ball](#) (lower back)

Step 2: Fix Rounded Shoulders

Rounded shoulders, although common, are actually a postural abnormality caused by spending hours hunched over behind a computer or desk, while driving a car or watching television, or while performing repetitive tasks on the job. In these forward-reaching positions, your chest, shoulders and hip muscles become shortened and tight while the muscles of your upper and middle back weaken. You can improve your posture by strengthening the weak upper back muscles, while stretching tight muscles in the chest, shoulders, lats and hips. As the upper back becomes stronger and the chest becomes more flexible, the shoulders naturally pull back—a sign of improved posture.

Sample exercises that strengthen the upper back:

- [Reverse dumbbell flys](#)
- [Rows with resistance band](#)

Sample exercises that stretch these tight muscles:

- [Standing chest stretch](#) (chest, shoulders)
- [Torso stretch](#) (shoulders, latissimus dorsi)
- [Standing quad stretch](#) (quads, hips)

Step 3: Neutralize Tilted Hips

When viewed from the side, your hips should be neutral and level. Some people's hips tilt forward, a postural abnormality known as anterior (forward) pelvic tilt. [Lordosis](#) (or "swayback") is another symptom of this tilt. Caused by weakness in the hamstrings (back of thighs), glutes (butt) and abs and tightness in the hip flexors and thighs, this is common in people who sit all or most of the day and spend hours with their legs bent. Here's a quick way to identify if you have any sort of pelvic tilt: Look at your belt line. Wearing your regular pants and a belt, when viewed from the side, the belt should be level all the way around the waist. If your belt line is higher in the back and lower in the front, you need to strengthen the weak muscles in your hamstrings, glutes and abs, while improving the flexibility of your thighs and hip flexors.

Sample exercises that strengthen the hamstrings and glutes:

- [Core exercises](#) listed above (abs)
- [Bridges](#) (hamstrings and glutes)
- [Leg curls with ball](#) (hamstrings)
- [Single leg hamstring flexion with ball](#) (hamstrings, glutes)

Sample exercises that stretch tight hip and quad muscles:

- [Standing quad stretch](#) (quads, hips)
- [Kneeling quad and hip stretch](#) (quads, psoas)

Step 4: Retract a Forward Head

When driving your car, how often is your head touching the headrest behind you? More often than not, your head is forward, not even touching the headrest that is behind you. Hours, days and years of driving a car, watching TV or working in front of a computer tighten the front and side neck muscles and weaken the deep and rear muscles of the neck. Most people think of the back and shoulders as keys to good posture, but the position of your head and neck is just as important. When viewed from the side, your ears should be above your shoulders. But most people's heads (and therefore ears) push forward of the shoulders; this is usually accompanied by a protruding chin and rounded shoulders (see "step 2" above). The muscles at the front of your neck must be strong enough to hold your head directly above the shoulders (instead of forward). By fixing the tight and weak areas of the neck, your head will once again center itself just above the shoulders—a sign of proper posture that may also decrease chronic neck pain caused by these imbalances.

Sample exercise that strengthens the weak neck muscles:

- **Neck retraction exercise** (upper trapezius and deep cervical flexors): Elongate the back of your neck by gently pulling your chin straight in as if you are hiding behind a tree and don't want your head to stick out past its edge. The highest point of your body should be the top back of your head. This counters the tendency to slip into a forward head posture.
- **Headrest exercise** (upper trapezius and deep cervical flexors): While driving, practice pulling your chin in and pushing your head into the headrest behind you for a few seconds at a time, then releasing. If you have a high-back chair that you sit in at work, you can do this during your workday, too.

Sample exercise that stretches these tight neck muscles:

- [Neck stretches](#) (scalenes and sternocleidomastoids) Use minimal force to prevent injury to the spine.
- [Myofascial neck release with foam roller](#) (to decrease neck stiffness and tightness)

Keep in mind that poor posture doesn't happen overnight, and there is no magic bullet to fix it other than consistently following these strength and flexibility exercises. To speed up the process, consider making adjustments in your daily routine. Rearrange your workspace and adjust your car seat so that you sit upright; upgrade to a firmer mattress to support your back; and do your best to stand and sit tall with your head high and your shoulders pulled down and back each day. In addition, women should wear high-heeled shoes sparingly to reduce tightness in the calves and switch sides of the body when carrying heavy purses.

As your posture improves, you will look younger and thinner and appear more confident. You'll also feel better, prevent back pain and improve athletic performance. So why wait for postural problems to get worse? Start incorporating these simple exercises and stretches into your workouts and workdays to start seeing results!

Selected Sources

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