Posture, from the outside in or the inside out?

Article by Megan Dunphy

Good posture is not just about your appearance, it's about your health, and may impact more than you think. Good posture has healthy consequences. Did you just straighten up a bit after reading the last sentence? GOOD- you just did something positive for your health. Now if only you could maintain that posture for the rest of the day.

What is 'good' posture?

Most people think about posture as the body's alignment in sitting or standing still. Good posture is commonly defined in terms of the contours of the body, such as the chest, shoulders, spine, and neck. In reality, posture is more than how you sit or stand, it's a dynamic activity. Your posture is generated by your movement- by the way you carry yourself as you go through your life.

In other words, posture refers to our dynamic, adjustable, and responsive positioning to the environment. Misalignment of certain body segments as a result of postural deviation will cause compensatory effort by other segments to maintain balance, resulting in stress and strain on other areas, and potentially resulting in pain.

Although there are sometimes structural reasons that prevent balanced posture and good use of the body, most of us are guilty of misusing our body mechanics due to habit. The fact that a large number of doctor appointments involve pain as a major symptom, and that most pain problems relate to muscles and joints, shows just how important better posture and body use is. When we misuse our bodies, it's the muscles and joints that bear the strain and end up causing pain.



An "ideal" posture is defined by a posture where muscles are most relaxed and less contracted. However, in terms of posture, one size does not fit all. Healthy posture is characterized by an ease of movement, with movement flowing effortlessly between limbs and trunk.

Impacts of Posture

Improving posture can have a positive impact on respiratory and digestive functions, decrease muscle tension, decrease pain, and improve how you feel physically. In addition, posture can change your brain chemistry, affecting your moods, emotions and behavior.

Posture has been a powerful tool in both expressing and recognizing emotion. You are probably familiar with all the ways we communicate non-verbally to others through our body posture, hand gestures and facial expressions. However, you may not be aware of how strongly you are communicating to yourself. The body shapes itself into different postures depending on the underlying mental and emotional state.

Your body reacts to how you feel: happy thoughts lead to more upright postures, while sad thoughts lead to slumped and

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hunched positions. The communication between your body posture and your feelings also goes the reverse way. You can change how you feel based on how you hold your body.

Moving muscles and feeling emotions are linked. For example, it has been found that people who have Botox injections can't feel emotions as well if they are unable to make a facial expression of that emotion. Similarly, when individuals contract facial muscles specific to smiling, they have a hard time generating a feeling of anger. On a larger scale, Amy Cuddy found that large body postures change brain and body chemistry. By

standing in a space-occupying posture (arms expanded, legs open) the subjects produced more testosterone and less cortisol (a hormone associated with stress); they were also more likely to take risks. Check out her TED talk .

How does our posture form?

Your posture is your story. How we carry our bodies evolved from how we were supported and regarded by other people from the time we were born. Your posture emerges from your interactions with the world around you, and your responses program the way you stand and move. In addition to being shaped by your personal history, posture is influenced by: geographical features such as crowds or open terrain, by weather and clothing, media images, and your relationship with gravity. How we stabilize ourselves determines our posture and the freedom, efficiency, and grace with which we move. The essence of posture is the distinctive way in which each of us negotiates between moving and holding still in relationship to gravity.



We have two types of muscles in our body: (1) deep stabilizing muscles which provide support for joints and internal organs; and (2) superficial or global muscles which produce the visible movement of our bodies. Contraction of the deep muscles allows us to create the stability we need to control our actions. These are the "deep core" muscles which are the focus in Pilates for stabilization.

If we are well oriented and able to stabilize using our deep core muscles, we can stabilize ourselves in ways that allow our bodies to remain open and expressive. But if orientation or stability is insufficient, we compensate, often by stabilizing too much. We contract our muscles resulting in diminished dimensions: we become shorter, narrower, or flatter through subtle contractions of deep muscles. Pain, stress, fear, and other emotions can also result in postural changes. When threats are repeated, our protective responses become chronic tensions. The responses become habitual because as a defense mechanism they worked: we survived.

Changing your posture isn't only about appearances, it's about improving comfort and efficiency within your body. It is never too soon, or too late, to create healthier posture. Poor posture habits are poor habits. To change any habit requires understanding. You can change your posture by relearning how to use your body more efficiently. At In Balance Physio & Pilates, we can help you become aware of any postural deviations you may have and assist you in reversing them. We also offer Pilates classes which can help improve your posture through increased strength, stability, and awareness.

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