

Proper Posture through Back Strengthening

By Kent Pegg

Proper posture is a necessary component of a person's overall healthy lifestyle. But an increasing number of people are experiencing posture problems.

Improper posture is most often exhibited by a person having a forward lean at the waist and a forward rounding of the shoulders.

Postural problems occur and increase gradually over time. As the forward lean and rounding increase, a person's center of gravity is moved forward as well.

This changed center of gravity then pulls a person forward even more, increasing the postural problem and leading to an even more forward center of gravity.

Today's lifestyles also contribute to the postural problems faced by many. All of our activities are performed in front of us which means that the muscles in the front the body become strengthened through our daily activities.

Since strengthening is tightening, the muscles in the chest and front shoulders become tighter and contribute to pulling the shoulders forward.

As we become more sedentary in our jobs and lifestyles we're spending more time at the desk and computer and in front of the television. These activities, like many others, contribute to the posture problems in many people.

And, while a growing number of people are going to the gym to try to correct posture problems, many are performing their workouts in a manner that is actually worsening the problem.

You'll see a lot more bench pressing and front shoulder raises in many people's routines rather than back exercises. Over-working the chest and front shoulders will only compound the postural problem of forward lean and shoulder rounding.

So what can be done to improve your posture and maintain proper spinal alignment?

Many people are making a conscious effort to "sit up straight" and "keep their head up."

While this is a good start, our lives are far too complex and busy to be able to focus enough on our posture. There are too many other things occurring for us to be able to pay enough attention to our posture for us to be able to affect any change.

The best approach for improving your posture is to let your body do the work for you. By strengthening the correct muscles, you can return your body to the upright position it has always wanted.

Strength training to correct typical postural problems should contain four components: scapular retraction exercises, scapular depression exercises, shoulder rotation exercises, and lower back exercises.

Scapular retraction exercises focus on the rhomboid and trapezius muscles between the shoulder blades. Strengthening these muscles helps pull the shoulder blades back.

To strengthen these muscles you need to perform rowing exercises. Cable rows, high rows, low rows, and bent rows can be done with both weight machines and free weights.

When performing rows, focus on pulling your shoulder blades back and together, as if you're pinching your shoulder blades together. It helps if you imagine that your

elbows are leading the way as you pull back rather than pulling your hands toward your body.

Scapular depression exercises work your lats and help keep your shoulders down. Too often we carry stress in our shoulders, leading to a tightening of the upper traps and neck and causing shoulder elevation.

Exercises like pull-ups and pulldowns will strengthen your lats and keep your shoulders from elevating.

Some of the most under-exercised areas of the body are the muscles that keep the shoulders rotated back. These muscles include the rear deltoids, teres major, teres minor, and infraspinatus.

To strengthen these muscles perform rear shoulder raises with dumbbells or use a reverse seated pec machine. Doing so will help rotate your shoulders back into their proper position.

Finally, exercise your lower back to help keep your body upright. Performing good morning exercises or using a 45-degree back hyperextension bench will help strengthen your lower back.

Remember to use caution when working out your lower back. Since there is not a lot of muscle in the lower back it is more susceptible to injury if not worked out correctly.

Always watch your form and use light weight when doing lower back exercises. Get help from a professional if you have any questions or concerns.

Also, work out your lower back after you've worked out the rest of your back. By doing your lower back work last, you'll ensure that you're properly warmed up and have good blood flow into the often-injured lower back area.

If your posture is worsening, take steps to correct the problem. The work you put in now will pay big dividends down the road.

Most postural problems can be improved through proper exercise and a little work on your part. A stronger, straighter body is waiting for you.

Kent Pegg is a certified personal trainer and the co-owner of the Los Alamos Fitness Center. If you have any questions about the information or exercises in this article you can call him at 662-5232.