

CENTRAL CONNECTICUT HEALTH DISTRICT

SERVING THE TOWNS OF BERLIN, ROCKY HILL AND WETHERSFIELD

Central Office:
505 Silas Deane Highway
Wethersfield, CT 06109
Phone (860) 721-2822 Fax (860) 721-2823

Berlin Office:
240 Kensington Road
Berlin, CT 06037
Phone (860) 828-7017 Fax (860) 828-9248
www.ccthd.org

Rocky Hill Office:
761 Old Main Street
Rocky Hill, CT 06067
Phone (860) 258-2770 Fax: (860) 258-2767

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Poor Posture Can Be A Pain in the Neck

One of the leading causes of physician visits in the United States is back pain. The American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons estimates that 80% of all Americans will suffer with back pain at some point in their lives. Approximately \$50 billion is spent annually on care for back pain, and nearly 1/3 of all Americans over the age of 18 sought professional help during the past 5 years for this condition.

During the month of May, designated as Correct Posture Month by the American Chiropractic Association, the importance of spine health is highlighted. Today, back and neck injuries are as likely to occur from an office job as a construction job, from improperly worn backpacks, and from playing computer and video games. Poor posture makes the back and neck more susceptible to injury, leads to weak, strained, and shortened muscles, and places additional stress on ligaments, joints, and bones.

Growing up, to stand up straight and not to slouch. But exactly what is good posture? Essentially, it is keeping all parts of the body balanced and supported by maintaining each part of the body in proper alignment with the other body parts. Poor posture can result in anatomical changes over time, resulting in constricted blood vessels and nerves as well as damage to discs, joints, and muscles. Headaches, fatigue, problems with breathing, and pain in the back, shoulders, and neck are the result. Poor posture can occur in any position. Some examples are

- slouching, shoulders hunched forward
- carrying a heavy object on one side of the body
- holding a telephone between the neck and the shoulder
- wearing high-heeled shoes or clothing that is too tight
- holding the head too far forward
- sleeping on a mattress that lacks proper support.

The most common cause of back pain from poor posture is muscle strain. Exercise can help prevent injury to the back and the neck, especially strength building and stretching exercises. Strength building exercises are important to strengthen and maintain muscles in the necessary condition to support the weight of the head and the body. Since muscles support the spine, any muscle weakness will contribute to poor posture. Muscles also need to be flexible so they do not shorten and throw the back out of alignment.

In addition to exercising, additional measures can be employed to maintain good posture and resulting back health.

When standing, keep your weight on the balls of the feet, not the heels; keep your feet slightly apart, in line with the shoulders; do not lock the knees; keep the shoulders upright with the arms hanging naturally at the sides of the body. Also, when standing for prolonged periods, remember to shift the weight from one side to the other or rock back and forth from heels to toes.

When sitting, avoid slouching or leaning forward, keep the knees even or slightly higher than the hips, and be sure both feet are flat on the floor. In office chairs, make sure your back is aligned against the back of the chair, and be sure arms are flexed at an angle of 75-90° in relation to the elbows. And if you sit in front of a computer for any length of time, be sure to use an ergonomically designed seat that can be adjusted to fit the user, keep the top of the computer monitor at or below eye level, and keep the wrists level, not angled up or down. Use a footrest for any chair that is too high for the feet to rest comfortably on the floor. In a car, sit with your back firmly pressed against the seat, adjust the seat so that you do not lean forward, and be sure the headrest supports the middle of the head.

When lifting and carrying objects, remember to always bend at the knees, not the waist, and keep the object close to your body. If carrying an object in one hand, switch to the other hand from time to time, and if using a backpack, avoid leaning forward and rounding the shoulders; try to keep it as light as possible and balanced on both sides.

To maintain good posture while sleeping, choose a mattress that is firm enough to offer adequate support, but not so firm that it is not flexible to accommodate and support the body's curves. The pillow should keep the head aligned with the spine; it should not be so high as to raise the head higher than the level of the spine. Avoid sleeping on the stomach—sleeping on the side is usually more comfortable. Use a flat pillow between the legs to keep the spine properly aligned. When sleeping on your back, a pillow under the knees and a rolled up towel under the lower curve of the back can help keep the body in the proper position so the back is straight.

Whether sitting, standing, or lying down, changing positions often will help to both prevent and relieve back pain. Back pain caused by poor posture often exhibits certain tell-tale signs. These include pain that is worse at certain times of the day, pain that starts in the neck and moves down to the upper back, then the lower back, and the limbs, pain that is reduced or eliminated by changing positions, pain that occurs intermittently over a period of months, and pain that comes on suddenly after something new is introduced, such as a new job, new car, new office furniture. But whatever the cause, back pain impedes one's ability to be productive in the workplace and impairs enjoyment of leisure-time activities. Maintaining good posture prevents and limits back pain, resulting in more energy, less stress, and less fatigue. When back pain occurs, a number of options exist to remedy the problem, such as pharmacological and or surgical treatment, acupuncture, massage therapy, physical therapy, exercise programs (including yoga and tai chi), and chiropractic manipulation.

To learn more about correct posture and back and neck pain, contact the American Chiropractic Association at 1-800-986-4636 (www.amerchiro.org), the American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons at 1-800-346-2267 (www.aos.org), or go to www.spine-health.com or www.back-pain-management.com. Additional information about this or other public health concerns is available at the Central Connecticut Health District, 860-721-2822 (www.ccthd.org).