

(THE BODY)



Bad posture won't just make you look like the **Hunchback of Notre Dame** in your later years—it can cause serious health problems as early as your forties. Here are a few simple techniques to **get your back on track**
By Jim Atkinson

*STRAIGHTEN UP!

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(Photographs by ZACHARY SCOTT)

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I WAS WATCHING George W. Bush on CNN the other day, and I noticed for the first time that, all matters political aside, the forty-third president of the United States has terrible posture. Standing at a podium accepting warm applause, Bush had thrust his head forward so far that it created the optical illusion that it had retracted into his torso, like a turtle's does. Incongruously, his shoulders were thrown way too far back, which only worsened the turtle thing and probably wasn't all that great for his cervical spine, either.

It wasn't that he was exactly slouching, which is what we generally think of as bad posture. He was just standing awkwardly—"randomly," as posture expert Ida Rolf once put it—and his attempts to right his alignment by stiffening his back had only made matters worse. I know

this most acutely because I've always had the same problem. The difference between the president and me is that I've decided to do something about it. After decades of standing, walking, sitting, and even sleeping as a misaligned heap, I've decided to get my posture right.

Bad posture may be the most underrated of personal-risk behaviors. It won't kill you like smoking, but it can contribute to making you mighty miserable: 80 percent of us will experience noticeable back pain during our lives, and most of it will be caused not just by injury or illness but by the slow grind of bad posture. Bad posture can contribute to migraine headaches, hypertension, and stress injuries of the knee and hip; correcting it may help forestall the progress of what many doctors say is the next emerging epidemic of disability: osteoporosis. So while this was surely a matter of vanity—I happened to catch my reflection in a store window the other day, and realized I was doing my own version of a turtle—it is also a matter of good health.

STANDING UP WAS A STUPID IDEA TO BEGIN WITH

The first thing I needed to dope out was how my posture got bad in the first place. It all starts with gravity, which dictates that our bones, muscles, and organs literally drag us toward the ground every waking moment that we're standing or sitting. If you don't think this is true, consider that during any given day, the average person becomes a quarter- to a half-inch shorter due simply to the downward tug of gravity.

Bad posture is a failed effort to accommodate the body to this inexorable force. And according to followers of Matthias Alexander, the Australian-born actor who is widely regarded as the most prominent of modern posture gurus, this



★ Finding "the top of your head"—the place where your head feels most unencumbered by gravity—is a key to good posture.

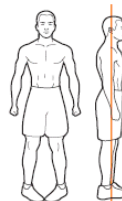
failure usually starts with the head, one of the heaviest body parts. If your head is too far forward—as in the president's case and my own—or too far back in relation to the rest of the body, your posture is doomed from the get-go: The shoulders, rib cage, pelvis, knees, and feet will be more inclined to misalign as you try to contort yourself into a pose that feels comfortable. Aside from tightening your back, you may start carrying one shoulder or hip a little higher because it makes you feel more aligned. Not only will you look like crap, both your cervical (neck) and lumbar (lower back) spine areas will be unduly wrenched.

A lot of backbreaking posture occurs when we're not standing at all but sitting. From the moment we enter school at age 4 or 5, we are virtually required to slump over a desk reading, writing, or eating. The basic human instinct is to slump the back forward—creating a

humpback—rather than leaning forward from the hip joint while keeping the back straight.

It may take years, even decades, for bad posture to cause pain or disability, but when it does, it can be as damaging as a traumatic injury. As described by San Francisco orthopedic surgeon Arthur White, a cofounder of one of the nation's first spine institutes, the grind of bad posture first causes small insults and tears to the discs that rest between the vertebrae of our spine. These tiny injuries, which can be caused by something as seemingly innocuous as sitting slumped over a computer all day for several years, send out pain impulses that cause the large muscles of the back to tighten, then spasm, in defense—which only causes a new sort of pain. Pain is an unrepentant bully, so it's not long before the spasmed muscles beget even more misery from the nerves in the deep tissues of the back.

SO WHAT IS GOOD POSTURE?



► Imagine the plumb line.

I knew what bad posture was, how it happened, and what it could do to the very physical essence of my body. But defining good posture was a bit more complicated. I knew it wasn't the at-attention military pose that our parents seemed to believe was ideal. Beyond that, good posture seemed to be governed by a rather large contradiction: On the one hand, you were supposed to keep everything aligned and reasonably vertical; on the other, you were supposed to stay relaxed. I realized that I had no idea what that looked or felt like.

In fact, it's really not all that complicated. You want your head firmly atop a neck that extends upward, not forward or

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backward; you want the S-shaped curve of your back to be modest—just slightly in at the cervical spine, then out at the middle, and in again at the lower back. The upper body should rest comfortably on a pelvis that is not tilted too far forward or back but that floats more or less vertically between the equal tensions of the lower abdominal muscles and the lower back.

A great way to locate this position, I found, is suggested by Paul D'Arezzo in his very useful *Posture Alignment: The Missing Link to Health and Fitness*. Stand with your feet hip-width apart next to a floor-length mirror. Turn both feet inward so that the toes touch and the heels remain about eight inches apart. Straighten your legs and feel your pelvis lift. Raise your shoulders up, then pull them back slightly, and then relax them downward. Now look at yourself. Other than the position of your feet, this is more or less ideal postural alignment. Viewed from the side, you should be able to imagine a plumb line running from the top of your head, down through the middle of your ear, past your shoulder, down to just behind the hip joint, in front of the knee, and just in front of the ankle.

Another way to learn proper posture is to watch how kids stand. I happened to be at a friend's daughter's wedding recently and was taking in everyone's posture when I noticed a 5-year-old boy in the pew across from me. During the standing portions of the ceremony, I observed that he had, according to what I'd been reading and hearing, positively perfect posture. He was in ideal alignment and balance, yet relaxed. Maybe that was due to his much lower center of gravity, but I suspect it's because bad posture is one condition that is entirely learned.

HOW TO UNLEARN BAD POSTURE

Old habits die hard, and I can't imagine a more entrenched set of them than the ways in which we stand, sit, and walk. As important as these habits are to every aspect of our lives, and although we can easily see them in the mirror every day, I don't think I know anyone who's preoccupied with his posture the way he is with his cholesterol numbers. Posture's just not on the health radar screen for most of us, so if we don't know what we're doing wrong, we really are clueless about how to correct it. Here are three different approaches I tried that will help you straighten up.



► Reach for the sky.



► The "chicken exercise."

1. SIMPLE STUFF TO DO AT YOUR DESK

A doctor friend recommended that whenever hours of slumping over the PC got to me, I should stand up and "reach for the sky"—that is, stretch my arms, neck, and back skyward, then slowly come back to a relaxed posture. This helps to re-extend the trunk, which tends to get compressed during the day. In *The Posture Prescription*, White suggests a series of maneuvers that you can perform at home or the office that will remind your body of proper posture and build useful muscles in the process.

The one I like best is what he calls the dorsal glide, also known as the "chicken exercise." Here's how it works: While sitting up straight, thrust your head—without involving the shoulders—forward as far as it will go. Repeat the movement several times, paying close attention to where your head comes to rest when you retract it. Once your neck muscles are loosened,

you should find the perfect position for your head after pulling it back. Your brain will record this position, because it is less stressful and painful than keeping your head forward, so that thenceforth, when your head gets out of line, you will automatically correct it.



► Yoga: the tree pose.



► Pilates: teaser prep.

2. EXOTIC STUFF: PILATES AND YOGA

The simple sitting techniques worked well, but I needed more. Good posture, I knew, had to do not only with proper positioning and alignment but also with good conditioning and muscle tone—especially of the muscles at the core of my body: the lower abdomen and back. That's right, guys: Sucking it in is a big part of proper posture. A flabby lower abdomen invites a forward pelvic tilt—potbelly—which causes an abnormally deep arch of the lower back, which, in turn, causes all kinds of problems with the rest of your back. The tension created by a toned stomach, on the other hand, ensures that the pelvis and lower back stay straight.

Sit-ups aren't necessarily the answer, because they can rip your back apart, so I turned to Pilates, the exercise discipline that borrows equally from yoga, boxing, and gymnastics. You needn't go out and take an expensive, time-consuming Pilates course to do your posture some good. I simply bought a Pilates book and looked for the movements that applied to the core. The best of them is brutally simple—a lengthening stretch adapted from the classic Pilates position "the teaser": You lie on a mat, then raise your legs and your torso simultaneously; now grab your lower legs with your hands and hold the position for a ten-count. Do it ten times. I guarantee you'll feel it in the morning. (Of course, if you want to get more serious about Pilates, I'd advise you to find a class.)

In much the same way, I went back to a basic-yoga videotape that my wife and I use to stay in shape during the winter and tried to isolate just a few moves and poses that reminded me of what good posture is. The most useful is the "tree pose," in which I'm required to stand on one leg while placing the opposite foot on the inside of the thigh. Hands are held above the head in a steeple position. Try this for thirty seconds, then a minute. It will force you, as posture experts like to say, to find the "top of your head"—an elusive concept that really just means finding that place where your head feels the most unencumbered by gravity. (continued on page 337)

**3. THE BIG BREAKTHROUGH:
ROLFING**

With a few simple tips, as well as borrowing certain poses and movements from Pilates and yoga, I was able to cobble together a pretty useful regimen to maintain my posture. But I found I was still guessing at precisely what good posture looked and felt like. There was only one solution: I needed to go get Rolfed.

Rolfing is named after its progenitor, Ida Rolf, a New York biochemist who, fifty years ago, developed her own discipline of body rehabilitation designed to improve posture, among other things. For the layman, the best way to conceive of Rolfing is as somewhere between chiropractic manipulation and a good massage. Rolfing concentrates on one of the most neglected tissue types in the body—the fascia, an almost infinite web of sinew that connects everything from the skin inward to the deepest internal organs. Rolf's theory was that gravity most profoundly affects the fascia, which is why standing, walking, and sitting for a day can crumple most of us like a Slinky. By working this tissue—lengthening and loosening it with massage—the body could literally be molded, like Silly Putty, back to its intended shape and posture.

After just one session under the steady hands of Nicholas French, a Dallas-based Rolfing practitioner who also happens to be a psychoanalyst and a former journalist, I could

tell that this procedure would lead me to the truth about my posture. After a solid hour of sometimes mildly painful probing of my deep tissues—the basic Rolfing technique is to seek the fascia and “release” it by using the knuckles or the heel of the hand, and also allowing gravity to push between the bones, muscles, and tendons—I could sense that my body was a different shape.

I could see it in the Polaroid pictures that Nicholas shot, before and after. Before, I had classic kyphosis—humpback—with my head turtled forward like George W. Bush's. I had attempted to correct this in the traditional way—by thrusting my shoulders backward. But the Rolfing had made my body do something different, even against the considerable will of my lifelong bad habits. It demanded that I extend my back and neck in ways I hadn't ever before. It forced on me a clear sense of where my head should be at all times—standing, sitting, lying. I finally learned where “the top of my head” was, and once I did, I found it hard to stand any other way.

Of course, my posture didn't become perfect overnight. Even after four Rolfing sessions, I can still catch myself in a store window or mirror doing a bad imitation of a turtle. But it won't be for long. Rolfing has given the muscles that control my posture a new memory. Now when I catch myself doing a turtle, I know more or less how to right it.

THE RESULTS

So what's the big deal? Well, for a few weeks, nothing, except I thought I looked a little better, and I somehow felt taller and lighter. But then, on my daily walks—sometimes as long as six or seven miles—I noticed I was making much better time. I began paying attention to my posture and gait, and sure enough, the Rolfing had made me much more cleanly vertical while walking or standing. This had the effect of lengthening my stride and minimizing the resistance of my torso. Soon I also noticed that my blood pressure was consistently lower, the result, it seemed, of better respiration. The lengthening of my rib cage and my consequent straighter posture was allowing me literally to breathe easier. This, in turn, has improved the quality of not only my exercise but my sleep. Before my personal-posture project, I was given to awakening three or four times a night. Now I sleep at least six hours straight before awakening—something I attribute to improved breathing due to better posture.

“It's hard for people to understand,” Nicholas said one afternoon. “But you improve your posture and everything else falls into line, too. It really can change the way people look at you and the way you think of yourself.”

JIM ATKINSON is a frequent GQ contributor.

