

WHY YOU NEED TO AVOID SLOUCHING

by Michaëlle Edwards LMT, EYRT

Are you too tired to sit up straight? Well, slouching is actually harder work than sitting or standing with a naturally aligned spine.

The hidden dangers of long hours sitting at a computer

Poor posture is an epidemic in the Western World, and I feel it is a result of sitting poorly in chairs, doing forced compartmentalized exercises that shorten the trunk muscles, and hunching over laptops.

Although the human body's deep slow twitch postural muscles are designed to hold our head up and carry our body gracefully, few people have functional naturally aligned posture. Most suffer from chronic pain as a result of poor biomechanics and slouching. The back of the chair keeps the spine upright, causing a loss of the tone of our core postural muscles. So even when we get up out of our chairs, the habits stay in our body, leading to a chronically hunched posture, even when walking.

Our young people have the worst posture of any generation, and x-rays of some 20 year olds look like the arthritic spines of older people. We need to take serious measures to teach good posture and breathing habits, provide ergonomic chairs in our schools, and stop slouching.

Chronic pain costs billions to our health care system every year, and much of the pain begins with poor posture.

What happens to our body in a slouch?

The chair has a right angle that goes against our naturally curving spine. While sitting, many people drop their upper body and roll their pelvis back to sit on the lower tailbone and sacral area.

When the pelvis tilts backward, the breastbone sinks, the head goes forward, and the neck and back muscles get drafted into dysfunctional habits. Hence the tight shoulders and neck muscles are so common today.

The diaphragm is compressed by tight abs or slouching, and the mechanics of breathing are forced into the upper shoulder area that can enlist a low level flight-or-freeze response in the nervous system. When people get up to move, their body is still 'stuck' in the chair and the poor breathing and posture habits become the main 'program' of body biomechanics.

Poor posture contributes to chronic diseases

Kidneys and adrenals cannot function optimally when slouching and there are postural links to diseases such as chronic fatigue, fibromyalgia, rheumatoid arthritis, headaches, TMJ, and many other autoimmune diseases. According to Cedar Sinai Spinal Institute, 95% of all chronic pain in the human body is linked to poor postural habits. It should be obvious that aligned posture habits are the best health insurance policy for a pain-free vital life.

Support better alignment by getting your pelvis level

One can avoid slouching by taking the right angle dynamics out of the chair. When sitting, use a thick folded blanket or yoga block to get your hips at least four to six inches higher than your knees.

This levels your pelvis and engages the spinal extensors, the muscles that arch your back and lift the chest, that should be one and a half times stronger than the flexors that draw our body forward.

Exercising good posture involves waking up the core breathing muscles, and maintaining the inward curve to the lower back.

Many yoga poses and fitness exercises engage our muscles to make us slouch!

Poor posture creates dysfunctional breathing habits, and slouching is also a result of dysfunctional breathing habits. The connection between the two is a huge blind spot in the medical, yoga and fitness world.

Some athletes and yogis use poses and exercises that are magnifying slouching habits. Working the body hard in sit ups and forward bending positions over-engages the exhaling muscles or trunk flexors and locks them in, and people become literally stuck in the exhale.

Yoga forward bends with knees straight can shorten these flexors and overstretch the back muscles. Some fitness and yoga poses compress the diaphragm and make the ligaments in the hips and spine too loose to hold a balanced posture.

People who engage daily in crunching moves that tighten the abdominal muscles can shorten their trunk so much it causes their organs to protrude and make a 'pot belly.'

Cyclists in particular are known for hunching over their handlebars, and paddlers – seated as well as stand up – are often in very poor postural alignment when they exercise.

How can we stop slouching?

Manage your stress levels with walking and deep breathing. Focused breathing methods can greatly improve posture by toning your core muscles and aligning your spine from the inside out. Use a straw and practice doing inhalation resistance exercises for your breathing muscles instead of sit-ups. The aim is to get rid of ingrained tension habits, so that breath and movement happens easily and naturally.

Practice self-massage daily on the head, neck, feet, and arms to release unnecessary tension. Don't wait for someone else to massage you, you can and should massage yourself. Sit on chairs with the knees lower than the hips and stay upright on your sit bones. 🧘

About the author: Michaëlle Edwards is a licensed massage therapist, yoga teacher, musician, and postural therapist living on Kauai. She invented a new painless way to do Yoga, fitness, self-massage and stretching called *YogAlign*, a new book/DVD combo called *YogAlign – Pain-free Yoga From Your Inner Core* available at her website www.manayoga.com.

