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Straighten up your habits in and out of the gym to improve your workouts, increase your energy and boost your health.



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There's a reason your mother always told you to stand up straight: Besides sapping your energy and making it more difficult to accomplish everything you've got packed into a day, poor posture has a slew of health consequences that can put a damper on your fit lifestyle; back pain, neck tension, decreased focus and even problems with digestion, to name a few.

Learning to perfect your posture, on the other hand, can boost your active life and your results in the gym. That's because it all interweaves: The better your posture, the greater your range of motion and the stronger you get. The stronger you get, the harder you train, and the more muscle you add. The more muscle you add, the faster your metabolism, and the leaner your body and better your health. Not to mention that you'll reap the health benefits of straightening up: You'll prevent pain and injuries, boost your flexibility, reduce your stress levels (due to improved breathing) and feel more energized to succeed at your workouts and everything else you set out to accomplish in your day.

So how do you do it? “You’ve got to work at it a little,” says Steven Weiniger, DC, author of *Stand Taller – Live Longer*. You have four basic “posture zones”: Your head, torso, pelvis and legs, and your posture is dictated by how you balance them. “Think of blocks that are irregularly shaped balancing one on top of the other,” says Weiniger. “Ideally, when facing front, you should be able to draw a straight line from between your feet to your bellybutton, and through your nose. From the side, this line goes through your ankle, hip, shoulder and ear.”

In other words, you should be able to draw a line straight through your body, with no body part leaning forward, hunching back or out of line with the others. Your posture should be as close to this ideal standard as possible, but most people are out of whack in one zone or another due to sedentary jobs, repetitive motions and other lifestyle-related issues. Also, things like a large chest, a potbelly or a big bottom can pull your zones out of line, causing you to balance differently.

The good news is that active, healthy individuals like you typically have better posture than most people. The more fit and streamlined you are, the more in line you’ll be and the taller and straighter you’ll stand.

Become Mindful About Your Posture

Paying attention to your posture habits is the first step to straightening up. Make a conscious effort to think about the way your body aligns as you move, sit and stand during the day. Set an alarm on your cell phone, leave post-it notes on your computer screen and ask your friends and family to watch you as well. It might seem a little silly at first, but becoming more mindful about your habits now will improve your chances of making a long-lasting change that will become natural over time.

Train for Balance

Once you’ve become more aware of your posture habits, you can work to improve them right inside the gym. Each of your muscles has a counterpart, and training all your muscles equally and in balance will help correct your postural deficiencies and improve your training results.

Men are typically guilty of training their “mirror muscles” – the ones in the front that they can see when they look in the mirror. And you may be one of the many women who love to train their butts and legs. While this means that you can rock your short shorts in the summertime, it also means that you can suffer from tight hips and iliotibial (IT) bands. This causes lower back pain and kneecap misalignment if you’re not balancing your training by also working on your hip flexors, lower abs and hamstrings. If you want great posture, you need to train all your fit parts, even if you’re not a “leg woman.” Additionally, if you feel that

any of your muscles are weak or tight, work to balance them properly through strength training, stretching and massage.

Train these muscles sets equally for optimal posture:

- Glutes/hip flexors and lower abs
- Quads/hamstrings
- Calves/tibialisBiceps/triceps
- Chest/upper back
- Abs/lower back and glutes
- Front delts/rear and lateral delts

Focus on Form

Maintaining proper posture during your workout is also essential. “You won’t use the muscle effectively through its full range of motion (from the beginning of the move right through to the end) if you’re not positioned properly,” says Juliet Deane, CSCS, co-owner of a training studio in Morganville, New Jersey. Plus, using improper form can cause additional imbalances in your muscles, emphasizing the problems you already have and setting you up for injury later.

When doing sitting or standing strength moves, imagine a string attached to the top of your head lifting you toward the ceiling to help you sit up tall. “I tell people to tuck their shoulder blades into their back pockets as a visual to get them to retract properly,” says Deane.

When lying down, allow a natural arch in your lower back and draw your shoulder blades inward, and when lying facedown, focus on keeping your spine neutral. During your treadmill sessions, consciously check your posture every five minutes; you should be standing erect and be in balance, even when using an incline. “Think about walking your chest uphill, so you are constantly opening up and not rounding forward,” says Deane.

Manage Your Middle

Having a strong core is also essential to maintaining proper posture. That’s because your abdominal, hip and lower back muscles work together to keep your spine stable and supported as you train, run errands, sit at your desk at work, run to and from yoga class and cross off just about everything from your “to-do” list each day.

To prepare your core for this important task, strengthen it during your workouts. “Big money exercises like deadlifts, squats and other multi-joint moves incorporate a ton of core, so

use those frequently to multi-task, simultaneously burning fat, building muscle and improving posture," says Deane. A strong core also helps alleviate lower back and neck pain, so train it diligently.

Perform two to three abdominal and core moves several times a week, training for strength on some days with moves such as weighted crunches, and training for stability on alternate days with planks and side planks, suggests Deane. Together with balanced training and a focus on form during your workouts, keeping a strong core can help you to shape up your posture and reap the health benefits that come along with it.

Feel (And Look) Better

Straightening up your posture habits could actually help to make you longer, leaner and slimmer – all within just a few seconds. "When your shoulders are rounded forward and your pelvis is tilted, it gives you a pot belly, spreads your back and makes you look top-heavy," says Juliet Deane, CSCS, co-owner of a training studio in Morganville, New Jersey. "Your torso is also shortened, creating a roll of skin in your midsection that would not be there if you were standing properly."

Once you're upright you'll not only look better visually, but you'll also work better internally, improving digestion and increasing breathing capacity. "Think about it: if I cinch your midriff with a really tight belt, it's going to squeeze your guts too tight for proper digestion or breathing," says Steven Weiniger, DC, author of "Stand Taller – Live Longer," (BodyZone Press, 2008). "Same with posture – if you're slumped over, your lungs, diaphragm and stomach are compressed, affecting digestion and breathing."

Take Your Posture Picture

Think you've got good posture? Do this exercise and see for yourself.

1. Stand in bare feet with what you consider to be your very best posture in front of a clean wall.
2. Recruit a friend to take four picutres of you: Front, back and both sides.
3. Print the pictures out, one to a sheet.
4. Put dots on the pictures like this: front side – between your feet and on your nose; backside – between your feet and shoulder blades; side views – on your anklebone and ear.
5. Fold each paper in half along those dots.

6. Analyze your photos: are the two halves of your body the same? Do you lean forward or backward or to one side? Does your head jut forward like a turtle? Does your pelvis tilt forward or back?
7. Make note of your imbalances, then work to correct them. Take more photos next month and compare.

Feel More Confident

Need a little ego boost? Then sit up straight! A new study published in the European Journal of Social Psychology indicates that good posture can improve your self-image. Participants who sat up straight were more confident than those who slouched or hunched forward, according to study directors. “Additionally,” says Steven Weiniger, DC, author of “Stand Taller – Live Longer,” (BodyZone Press, 2008), “those who sit up and stand with good posture are perceived by others as stronger, more potent and more attractive than those who don’t.”

Extra Baggage

Your workout should happen inside the gym, not on your way to it. Use these tips when carrying weighty gym gear to avoid leaning like the Tower of Pisa:

- Choose a lightweight bag, made of durable material with ergonomic, padded straps.
- A loaded backpack or bag should not exceed 15 percent of your body weight so leave all unnecessary items at home.
- If it still feels like you’re lugging granite boulders, consider a gym bag with wheels and a handle as a back-saving option.
- If you’re using a bag with one shoulder strap, alternate carrying sides from workout to workout.
- Distribute the weight evenly throughout the bag or back for better balance.