

Posture: Slouching Toward Back Pain

Health and wellness tips from Anthem Blue Cross and Blue Shield

How long has it been since someone told you to "sit up straight"? Kids get advice on their posture all the time, but some adults could definitely use a reminder. People who slouch throughout the day can be vulnerable to a wide variety of problems, including back pain. If your back aches, you just might be able to relieve your pain by straightening up your act.

How does poor posture cause back pain?

When everything is properly aligned, the joints and muscles in your back easily share the burden of supporting your body weight. Poor posture disrupts this balance. As reported by the Cleveland Clinic, slumping forces the muscles and tendons in the lower back to work harder than usual, raising the risk of sprains and strains. Poor posture can also cause unnatural wear between joints, potentially setting the stage for arthritis.

What can I do to improve my posture?

For most people, good posture doesn't come easily. In fact, it usually takes a lot of practice to keep the back in its "natural" position. Many people with back pain need to enlist an occupational or physical therapist to help them improve the way they stand, sit, and sleep. Once they get into the habit, good posture eventually can become second nature.

Here are the basics of good posture:

Standing

- Think tall. The top of your head should stretch toward the ceiling.
- Think straight. You should be able to draw a straight line from your earlobe to the front of your anklebone, crossing the tip of your shoulder, the middle of your hip, and the back of your kneecap along the way.
- Think proud. Keep your chest out, your shoulder blades back, and your stomach tucked in.
- Keep it even. When standing still, your weight should be evenly distributed on each foot. You can also try setting one foot on a box or a footstool. Switch feet every several minutes.
- Forget fashion. A high-heeled shoe can throw off your posture and strain your back. Your shoes should be flat and comfortable.
- Don't become a statue. Move around as much as possible, and don't let your knees lock.
- Take a dance or yoga class. Yoga and dancing are among the best exercises for encouraging good posture. Also, taking the time to stretch and breathe deeply for a few seconds throughout the day usually can make you more aware of the way you're holding yourself.
- Wear comfortable clothing and avoid backpacks and briefcases that feel as if they're loaded down with bricks.

Sitting

- Sit straight. This mantra of first-grade teachers really is good advice. Keep your upper back straight, your head high, and your shoulders relaxed.
- Choose your chair with care. A firm, straight-backed chair can give your back extra support. The ideal chair will also have armrests. If your chair at work doesn't have armrests, position it so you can easily rest your arms on your desk.
- Do your leg work. Your knees should be slightly higher than your hips, and your feet should be flat on the ground.
- Consider a cushion. A small cushion or towel tucked between your lower back and the chair can help keep your spine in line. Besides, it feels great!

Lying down

- Stay off your stomach. You'll probably feel most comfortable sleeping on your side with your knees slightly bent. You can also try sleeping on your back.
- Pillows aren't just for heads. If you sleep on your side, you can try putting a pillow between your knees.
- Stay firm. A sagging mattress can put extra strain on your back. Find a mattress that's nice and firm, or, as an alternative, try putting a board under your old mattress.

For more information on back care, visit the Back Care Center at Anthem.com. Click on MyHealth@Anthem at the member home page and then the link for Self-Care Centers.

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