

Outsmart back pain

Back pain and poor posture are closely related.

*Physiotherapist and Pilates instructor
Sophia Auld explores strategies to help
build a healthier back.*

RIGHT now, take stock of your posture. If it's great - congratulations. Chances are, though, you're slouched as you're reading this. Poor posture can cause a host of health problems, including spinal pain, fatigue and decreased breathing capacity. While these symptoms occasionally indicate something serious, they can often be corrected with better posture.

If you suffer from back pain, you're not alone. About 3.7 million Australians, or 16 percent of the population, have back problems, research from the Australian Bureau of Statistics shows. It is estimated that 70 to 90 percent of people will suffer from lower back pain at some point in their lives. Good posture has also been shown to make you look younger, slimmer, and more confident. Think: dancers and Pilates instructors! Start reaping the benefits of great posture with these spine-strengthening activities.

Yoga

Yoga uses controlled movements and sustained poses to improve body awareness. "Yoga movements bring awareness to where the body is stiff and where it moves freely," explains Kaye Tribe, from the Academy of Yoga Learning. "It also strengthens the muscles of the core and vertebral column. Back bending poses lengthen muscles at the front of the body, encouraging deep breathing. Exercises from a prone position strengthen the muscles of your back and shoulders that become weak from hours of sitting," Tribe says. Yoga therapist Stacey Nelson teaches yoga to children and young mums. Her classes address postural problems from increasing use of technology. "I tailor a yoga class to strengthen the back muscles and open the chest, which facilitates good posture," she explains.

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Pilates

Popular for exercise and rehabilitation, Pilates claims to achieve lean muscles, improved posture and core strength. Pilates principles include proper alignment, controlled breathing and co-ordination. "Postural balance can be realigned with a Pilates conditioning program. Correct postural alignment will support your vital organs, enabling them to function as intended, and enhance your general sense of wellbeing," says Jenny Birckel, sports physiotherapist and director of the Pilates Institute of Queensland. Follow the steps in "Better body alignment" to achieve Pilates posture:

Tai Chi

This ancient Chinese martial art is practised around the world as a gentle exercise. It incorporates flowing movements with good alignment, mindfulness and abdominal breathing. "When you have the right posture and breathing, it activates the stabiliser muscles and makes your back stronger," says Dr Paul Lam, GP and founder of the Tai Chi for Health Institute. "When you're using abdominal breathing, you are more relaxed and feel better." Research has shown improvement in chronic lower back pain from a Tai Chi program. "My philosophy in Tai Chi is bringing into balance the mind, body and breath," says Phil Pointon, an instructor with the Australian Academy of Tai Chi and Qigong. "First you learn the external form, where your hands and feet go. Secondly, you learn how to have a good upright posture. Then you focus on the breath. In bringing those three together, Tai Chi becomes very powerful."

Weight training

Lifting weights is not just for body builders. Regular weight training blasts body fat, tones muscles and revs up the metabolism. The key to improving posture with weights is activating the back and core muscles, according to master personal trainer Greg Dolman. Regardless of the exercise you're doing, maintaining a good spinal position is vital. Start slowly and build up gradually. "You're training the body to maintain good posture under increasing loads," says Dolman. "Have your trainer spot your technique, and devise a program to suit your goals." Dolman also advises against too many overhead movements to begin with, as these can cause excessive spinal extension. Save them for when your back is stronger.

Fringe benefit alert: Studies show that dancers have the highest bone density, which is wonderful news for their backs, bones and bodies.

Dancing

From ballet to belly-dance, Irish to hip-hop, good posture is integral to dancing. All forms of dance require body awareness and postural control. "Self-awareness - being able to feel, rather than just look at yourself in the mirror - is very important in dance," explains dance teacher Kristine Ditchfield. Ditchfield incorporates core and postural exercises in her classes, and emphasises the importance of maintaining a well-balanced body. "Dancers must ensure they do exercises in the opposite direction to the dance movements to keep the body supple and strong. Otherwise the body becomes overly stretched in one direction and weak in another," she says.

Swimming

It's hard to beat swimming for a low impact, whole-body exercise. Swimming improves posture, coordination and balance, according to the Victorian Government's Better Health Channel. It's easy on joints, provides a cardiovascular workout, and strengthens the back and shoulders. Good technique is the key, so get a coach to check your form in the water. Doing only one stroke can cause muscle imbalances, so use a variety of strokes to work different muscle groups. Include some backstroke - it stretches the chest and strengthens the back of the shoulders, promoting good posture.

If you have back pain that is severe, unrelenting or keeps you awake at night, or unexplained weight loss or fever, these can be warning signs of a more serious problem. Seek advice from your health care professional for personalised assessment and advice. ✨



Better body alignment

1. Place feet hip width apart, with your weight evenly distributed.
 2. Keep the knees soft and facing forward.
 3. Ensure your pelvis is level; engage the lower abdominals.
 4. Draw your shoulder blades gently back and down.
 5. Lift the crown of your head towards the ceiling.
- Use a mirror at home to check your posture, or ask your Pilates instructor for advice.