

The Headache Series

by Dr. Martha Rich

POSTURE

We see many clients who come in with the chief complaint of headache. The causes are almost always multifactorial, but posture – especially while using a computer – is often a significant contributing factor. The human body was not designed to sit in front of a computer or TV all day long. As the hours pass, we all begin to slouch. In this position, the head unconsciously leans forward and leads with the chin. The weight of the head, comparable to that of a bowling ball, is set off-balance on the neck, straining both neck and shoulder muscles as a result. The longer you sit or stand with the head off-balance like this, the more the neck and shoulder muscles tighten and strain. Spasms begin and the pain refers upward, invariably causing a headache.

Your glasses may also play a role in your posture at the computer. Bifocals and trifocals are not designed for computer use, and will cause you to pivot your head up and back in order to see the screen. Again, in this position, your head is set off balance with your neck and shoulders, straining the muscles and causing a headache. If you wear bifocals or trifocals, it may be a good idea to invest in a pair of separate computer glasses. Many people are able to get away with “cheaters”, or inexpensive reading glasses, for computer use only.

But computers are not entirely to blame for muscular headaches related to posture. In truth, almost any activity that requires significant concentration will likely distract you from the signals you are getting from your neck and shoulders to rest and stretch, which can easily trigger a headache. Reading or studying for long periods of time curled up sideways on a bed or couch can be particularly hard on the body. Handwork of any kind, including knitting, sewing, woodworking, beading, and weaving can all induce headaches as a result of unbalanced working postures.

Driving for long periods of time can also take its toll, but not just for people who work from their cars. Many parents we see who spend several hours each day carting their children to and from activities most of the week can easily develop headaches stemming from their driving postures. Even gravity plays its part in pulling us into a slouched position, and fighting that tendency is a lifelong habit we should all strive to create. ‘Sit up straight!’ has been the chorus of parents around the world for years, and as it turns out, straight posture doesn’t just make you look better – it also helps prevent headaches.

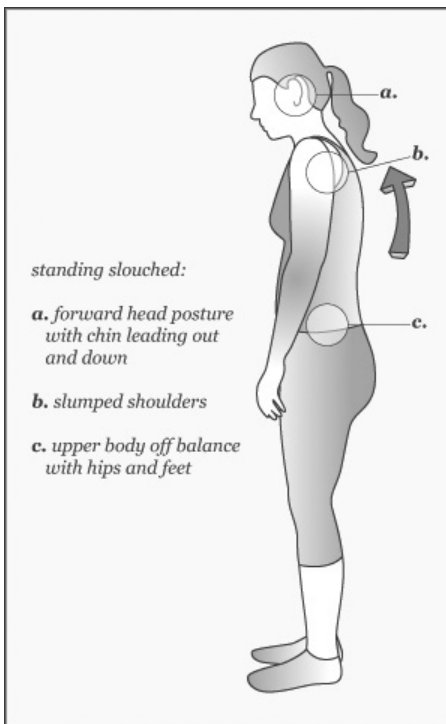
Sometimes, individuals find it extremely difficult to correct their posture. Usually this is because the muscles of the neck and back required to hold straight posture have been underused because of slouching habits and need time to develop. But in some cases, a poor bite can actually play an unconscious role in bad posture. Even when we are not eating, our bodies strive to position our lower jaw into a comfortable alignment with the upper jaw. In certain types of malocclusion, the teeth fit together more comfortably when the lower jaw is set forward. It is very common in these cases for an individual to develop a constant forward head posture in order to help those teeth stay in alignment. Ultimately, correction of the bite through treatment with a qualified dentist will not only stabilize the bite, but also improve the posture.

Muscular headaches related to posture are extremely common. Even I get them after a long day of bending forward to see inside someone’s mouth. Careful attention to body positioning, including ergonomic adjustment of your workstation, and regular efforts to take short walking and stretching breaks throughout the day, can help significantly. And at the end of an especially hard day, when close attention to your posture isn’t always

possible, a gel-based ice pack wrapped around the neck and over the shoulders can often make a muscular headache like this magically disappear without using any medication at all.

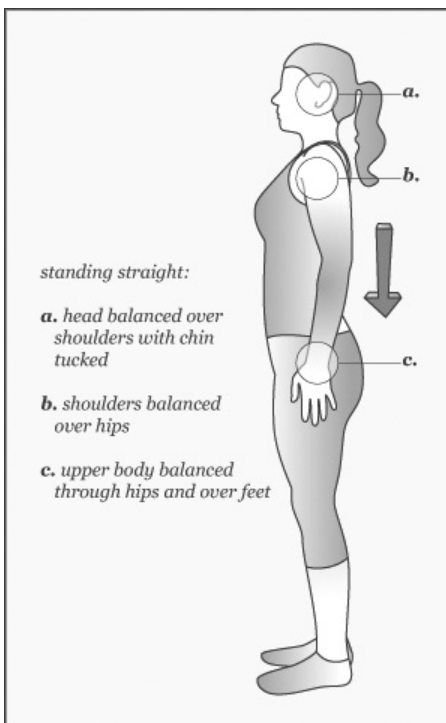
CORRECTING YOUR POSTURE

Regardless if you are sitting or standing, it's always good idea to get into the habit of correcting your posture several times an hour in order to avoid body pain and eventual headaches. The following diagrams and explanations are provided to help you remember the basics of good posture in most situations.



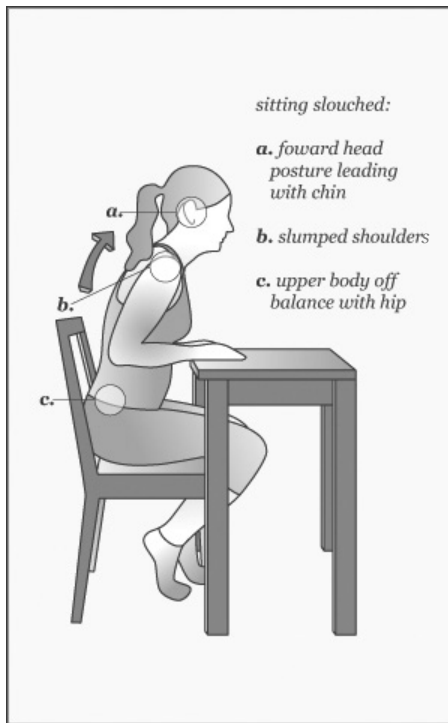
STANDING SLOUCHED

- Pitching your head forward in a slouch causes your entire upper body to be off balance with your hips and feet.
- The muscles in your upper back and neck must strain in order to counter the weight of the head.
- Body pain and headaches will likely result.



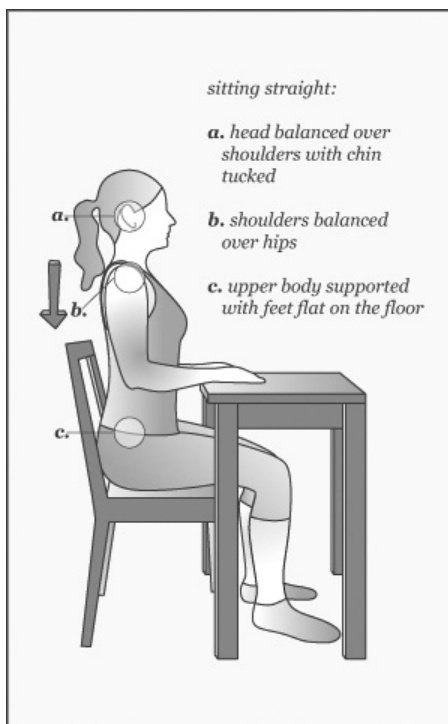
STANDING STRAIGHT

- When standing, the shoulders should be back and down with the upper chest (heart center) tilted up.
- The ears should be over the shoulders and the chin slightly tucked. This equalizes the forces placed on the neck and shoulder muscles both front to back, and side to side.
- The shoulders should be over the hips, and the hips should be over the knees.
- In the proper posture, your arms should hang loosely at your sides and your hands should rest slightly toward the back side of your legs, rather than the front.



SITTING SLOUCHED

- In a sitting position, a slouch tends to be more dramatic. The head pitches further forward and the chin juts out noticeably.
- As with standing, the muscles in your upper back and neck must strain in order to counter the weight of the head.
- This body posture is one of the most common causes of muscular headaches.



SITTING STRAIGHT

- Sitting posture is very similar to standing posture with the shoulders back and down, and the tummy slightly tucked.
- As with standing, the ears should be over the shoulders, and the shoulder should be over the hips.
- Feet should always be resting flat on a solid surface in a sitting position.
- In the proper posture, your forearms should be able to rest gently on the tabletop without forcing your shoulders up.

A Final Note About Workstations

Almost all desktop workstations require that you raise your monitor several inches above the desk surface so that you can look straight at it from a seated position. Laptops, phones and tablets are not easily adapted to this position and automatically cause you to pitch your head down and forward whenever you use them. If you will be working on a laptop, phone, or tablet for a long period of time, make sure to take walking and stretching breaks at least once an hour or more to prevent your muscles from going into spasm.