

## Improve Your Posture

**Bad posture getting you down? It shouldn't be – you can easily get good posture. Just follow these simple exercises to improve your posture and stand tall.**

By Lindsay Borthwick



Want to know the secret to legendary actress Audrey Hepburn's allure? Whether dining at Tiffany's or riding her Vespa in the streets of Rome, she simply had great posture. Fast-forward to today, and what Hepburn knew intuitively has been proven: People with good posture are perceived as more attractive. Still other psychology research has shown that we look slimmer when we stand up straight, and that posture can affect our mood and behaviour.

But there are plenty of other practical reasons to think about posture. Body alignment controls what we can and cannot do—especially as we get older. Once our alignment is off, tight muscles get tighter, weak muscles get weaker, and posture declines even further.

Bob McCollum, adult program director at [Canada's National Ballet School](#) (where he's been teaching for almost 30 years), begins every new class with a lesson on "ideal posture," also referred to as "standing posture." Not only is it the key to achieving the grace and elegance of a ballet dancer (no one wants to see a slouching swan or crooked Sugar Plum Fairy, after all), it's also the foundation for safe, comfortable and effective movement. "Without good posture, you're more prone to pain and injury," says McCollum. Good posture also helps keep your organs and muscles working optimally, which in turn improves performance – whether you're a competitive athlete or just someone who is trying to keep fit.

Fabio Comana, exercise physiologist at the American Council on Exercise, says the philosophy in the fitness industry today is "straighten before strengthen" because starting a workout regimen with faulty posture will only perpetuate any problems that already exist.

According to Comana, there are three areas that are commonly misaligned: the shoulders, hips and ankles. Stretching and strengthening exercises help to fine-tune the muscles around these joints and restore ideal posture. He says everyone would benefit from some simple "maintenance" exercises that target the flexor and extensor muscles at the ankles, hips and shoulders. Here's what he recommends.

## **Target: Shoulders**

This exercise prevents slumping forward, which may cause neck and shoulder pain.

### **Chest and shoulder stretch**

Lie on your back. Stretch arms out to the side and turn palms so they face upward. Inhale deeply, then exhale. Hold 30 seconds. Do two to four times.

### **Shoulder squeeze**

Lie on your back, arms stretched out to the side. Bend elbows 90 degrees so arms are in a bench-press position. Squeeze shoulder blades together without arching your back. Hold five to 10 seconds. Do two to four times.

## **Target: Hips**

This exercise prevents the pelvis from tilting forward and down, which may cause tension in the lower back muscles.

### **Hip flexor stretch**

While standing, lunge right leg forward onto a step; bend that knee until you feel a stretch in left hip. Be careful not to lunge too far. Hold 30 seconds. Switch legs and repeat. Do two to four sets.

### **Glute bridge**

Lie on your back, with knees bent and feet flat on the floor. Squeeze your butt muscles and push hips toward the ceiling, keeping shoulders on the floor. Hold five to 10 seconds. Do two to four times.

## **Target: Ankles**

This exercise prevents ankles from collapsing inward (pronating), which can lead to knee pain and hip misalignment.

### **Calf stretch**

Stand with arms stretched forward and palms against a wall. Keep left knee slightly bent and step right leg back. Keep right foot flat on the floor. Hold 15 seconds. Then, point toes of right foot inward and hold 15 seconds. Switch legs and repeat. Do two to four sets.

### **Proprioception exercise**

While standing, reach down and find ankle bones with thumb and index finger. Slide fingers forward until you feel a dimple in front of each bone. To get a sense of the ankle's range of motion, roll foot outward until you feel pressure on your index finger, then inward until you feel pressure on your thumb. Find the midpoint of that motion and stand up. This is the position in which your ankle is properly aligned. Practise standing in this position.

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