

Pain and disability arising from poor posture are rife. Is the cure as simple as straightening up?

By Emma Beddington

If I was to draw a straight line across the left shoulder and the right shoulder, there's about an inch difference. Your spine is twisted - you're twisting it both directions. Look how that right foot is coming out slightly ... You'll notice that your knees are also coming in, there's a slight knock knee going on on both sides - that's because you're also tilting forwards. So your pelvis is not only twisting, it's also tilted."

After five minutes walking on the treadmill in consultant biomechanist Tim King's clinic,

Cione Wellness, the news doesn't sound brilliant. King works with world-class athletes, and thankfully helps ordinary people with musculoskeletal and pelvic pain too. I'm here to self-consciously show him how my desk-potato body stands and moves.

I want my posture and gait assessed to see what problems I might be storing up, because back and neck pain is a huge, enormously worrying public health issue. Data from the UK's Office for National Statistics suggests 62,000 people have left Britain's workforce since 2019 because of it, and that's just the tip of the iceberg.

"We've certainly heard from our members that people are being seen more about back and neck problems," says Ashley James from the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy. "We know

that back pain is the number one reason for years lived with disability." We all know someone with acute or chronic back pain; our homes are full of muscle pain gels, massage balls, foam rollers and heat packs. Why? Because of how we live. "The key thing - and Covid has exacerbated it - is lack of movement," says James.

Katy Bowman, the author of the forthcoming book *Rethink your Position*, agrees. "We have a movement problem, and a side-effect of the movement problem is the posture problem. We are the ninjas of sitting."

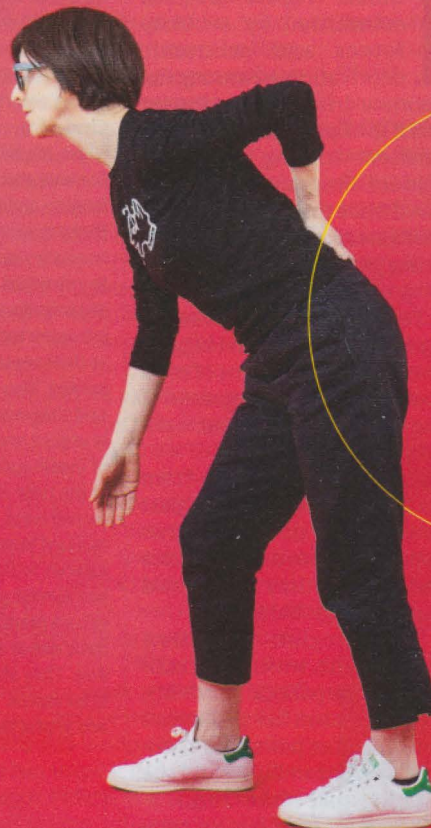
I'm a black-belt sitter, by turns slumped, crouched like a cathedral gargoyle or contorted into a human pretzel. I sit whenever I can, including brushing my teeth or cooking. I don't have serious back problems - yet - but my shoulders are tight, my



▲ Emma Beddington is examined by Tim King

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Out of whack



A happy body is one that doesn't get stuck in one position for long periods. As Ashley James puts it: "Your best posture is your next posture"

left buttock regularly aches and I get a niggling sciatic pain down the outside of the same leg. I'm desperate to stop things getting worse. Do I need to address the way I stand, sit and move?

Back in King's consulting room, he scribbles on a diagram to show me what's going on. My pelvis twists when I move, meaning one leg ends up "falsely shorter" and the other "falsely longer". The "longer" leg hitches up to keep me moving, overworking all the muscles under my glute: that's where the sciatic pain is coming from. He theorises it's due to a minor childhood fall (probably the time I came a cropper on the ice at Doncaster Dome). The result? I have deep lordosis (an arch in the lower back) and mild kyphosis (rounding in the upper back). I feel fine because my moderately

hypermobile - lax - joints have compensated. I wasn't aware of any of this. That's because, King says, the brain adjusts to tell you your posture is normal and keep you moving. "We're dynamic animals - we have to move to eat. It keeps recalibrating, normalising the new position."

It's worth challenging your brain with empirical evidence. "Our mind is not really helpful in terms of alignment, so walls are great. See how your body sits relative to a vertical line or wall," Bowman suggests. If you're in alignment "your backside is against the wall, the middle of your back (where a bra strap or heart-rate monitor would go) is against the wall, and the back of your head would go against the wall. With common sense you can see: oh, my head is in front of my body." Obviously I try it: my

My left buttock regularly aches and I get a niggling sciatic pain in my leg

bum and shoulders are touching the wall, but my head is a good inch and a half off it.

I'm left feeling self-conscious about my knock knees, forward slump and tortoise neck - "like an overcooked prawn", as my best friend says. The good news is that King doesn't think I need expert help: some simple self-help measures should do the trick. So I try to walk more, implementing his recommended stride adjustment to get myself more upright - "an inch further and heel to toe". It feels weird, but I persist. I set an hourly phone alarm and do a quick quad or hamstring stretch or at least stand up. I not only brush my teeth upright but I also balance on one leg or do a few heel raises.

I'll never have the elegant carriage of a prima ballerina, but hopefully with a few lifestyle tweaks I can keep this imperfect, idiosyncratic bag of bones, muscles and ligaments working for as long as I need it.

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Move it or lose it 10 tips to improve your posture

1 Tackle your phone habit

Staring at our phones is a constant and pervasive habit, leading to forward head posture. Katy Bowman suggests: "Without raising your chest, slide your head towards the wall behind you while lifting the top of your head towards the ceiling." Do it whenever you remember - reading, walking and, yes, looking at your phone.

2 Move, move, move

As Bowman says: "Movement, like food, is not optional." Tim King is a fan of yoga, pilates and tai chi. Ashley James says: "It's all about doing something that is sustainable that fits into your life."

3 Move through pain

If you have back pain (and no other symptoms), "movement is absolutely a safe thing to do," says James.

4 Ditch weight worries

"Carrying a bit of weight on your back is good: you're going to get stronger," says James. "Load is good for the spine."

5 Look after your feet

"Feet are the foundation for the body," says Rebeca Gomez from The Foot Clinic. When the heel is out of alignment, "everything else tends to collapse". To prevent problems, she recommends shoes that hold you around the ankle. Get your feet checked annually, as you would your eyes or teeth.

6 Stretch

Simple stretches are a good corrective to sedentary living. I like Bowman's upper back stretch: I put my hands on the back of a chair, walk backwards to lower my chest until it's parallel with the floor, then move my hips over my legs.

Gomez recommends a deep calf stretch. Put a fairly fat book on the floor in front of something you can hold on to for balance. Place the front of both feet on the book with your heels on the floor. Tuck in your bottom, then try and lift your big toes off the book and towards the little toes. Hold for 60 seconds. When you're stretching, always do it on an outbreath, King adds.

7 Optimise your home office

To health-check your workspace, look out for these basics: your head should be upright with your ears above shoulders, back slightly reclined and supported, elbows bent and forearms level with the desk, and feet supported so the backs of the thighs are parallel to the floor.

8 Strengthen your pelvic floor

"The pelvic floor is like a mini-trampoline holding up your bladder, bowels and all your visceral organs. Keeping it toned and healthy is of paramount importance," says King. Kegel exercises are good, he adds, but don't overdo them. King also recommends a reverse situp: start seated and slowly lean backwards from the waist on an outbreath to just beyond your seated posture and hold for five to 10 seconds.

9 Breathe

"Poor posture is about breathing" says King. The linea alba - a band of connective tissue that runs down the front of your abdomen - is linked to your parasympathetic and sympathetic nervous system. "You have to breathe so the tummy comes out; if your chest moves, you're doing it wrong." Incorporate a few minutes into your daily routine.

10 Switch things up

The biggest problem for most of us isn't bad posture but failing to change postures. At work, "every hour, go to the toilet even if you don't need to, wash your face, get your body moving," suggests King.