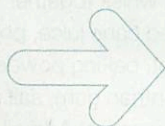




## Straighten up

Use your breath to undo asymmetry and create balance in your body.



**When's the last time** you took a deep breath? If you can't remember, chances are you're not just suffering from simple oxygen deprivation—you're slouching, too. Posture and breath are intimately connected, says Sherry Brouman, PT., ERYT, a physical and yoga therapist in Santa Monica, Calif. "When the breath is tight, the body is tight," she explains. "Good posture requires fluidity and space in the body—the opposite of tightness."

Shallow breathing and slouching create patterns of imbalance in the body that can be hard to break, according to Steven P. Weiniger, D.C., an Atlanta chiropractor and author of *Stand Taller—Live Longer* (BodyZone Press). "The body is trained in patterns of motion, meaning our muscles get better at doing whatever you ask them to do most," he says. So, for example, if you sit hunched over at a computer, maybe sitting with **more weight** on one hip than the other, you're unconsciously creating and **reinforcing** a pattern of asymmetry in your body.

What's worse, when you hit the gym after work—something that should be a great counter to the bad postural habits you've reinforced all day—there's a good chance you'll bring those imbalances to your exercise of choice (even yoga!). "Take a look around the next time you're at the gym," Weiniger suggests. "You'll find a lot of people slouched on the stair climber or treadmill. Unbeknownst to them, they're making their posture worse because they're reinforcing their bad posture in *all* their daily activities."

How can you break these poor posture habits? Bring more consciousness to your breathing and movements throughout the day. When you catch yourself slipping into negative patterns, you'll be able to stop and rethink what you're doing—and begin the process of retraining your body. Raise your posture awareness with these simple ideas and exercises:





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## Mind Body Fitness

1

### Take a stand

It may sound crazy, but practicing standing is a great way to figure out where your imbalances are so you can start to fix them, says Brouman.

- Stand with your feet hip-width apart and visualize each foot as a car, with four wheels evenly spaced at the outer and inner edges.
- When you can feel these eight "wheels," ask yourself if you're putting more pressure on one or more wheels at the expense of others. (Hint: If your arms naturally fall to the front of your body, odds are you typically place more weight on your back wheels.)
- Once you've figured out your imbalances, make adjustments so there's equal weight on each of these wheels. "This helps you lift up inside and relieve some of the pressure that gravity creates in the body," says Brouman.

2

### Just breathe

Since deep breathing requires good posture, you can use your breath to nudge your body into better alignment. Brouman's advice:

- Imagine that your body is a balloon animal, and your joints are the little twists that separate the balloon into sections. First notice the places where you normally feel "inflated" and the places where you don't. Next, inhale deeply and visualize the air pumping you up. Pay attention to your spine, shoulders, hips and knees. Are there any sections that feel relatively deflated?
- Imagine filling those deflated spots with air as you take deep, slow inhalations through your nose and exhale through your mouth.
- Do this exercise for at least five minutes, or until your balloon animal body is inflated. (The goal is to feel full, but not rigid.)



*Practice good  
balance to  
achieve ideal  
alignment.*



# 3

## Find your balance

Good posture is all about keeping ideal alignment whether you're standing, sitting or moving—and that takes good balance. Weiniger recommends the following exercise to build this crucial component of posture:

- Stand with feet hip-width apart, weight spread equally on all four "wheels" of each foot and breathe deeply for a minute or so.
- Raise your right knee to the level of your right hip and hold, ideally for five slow breaths (about 20 to 30 seconds). Repeat on your left side.
- Do this exercise against a wall or while holding on to the back of a chair if you can't lift and hold each leg without throwing off the good posture you established at the start. Work toward performing the exercise without a prop—and aim to do it every day.

## people watch

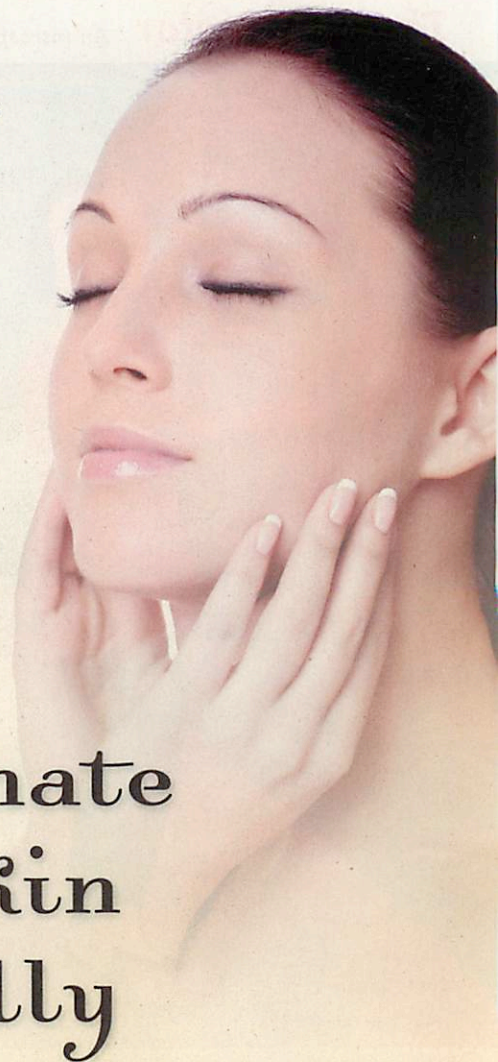
Why do so many of us have bad posture? "Because our sensory awareness is faulty," says Dana Ben-Yehuda, M.AmSAT, a certified Alexander Technique teacher in Mountain View, Calif. "If we could feel what's throwing our posture off, we'd fix it." The problem is that we don't sense the thing that's off, but a good way to adjust that is by watching others move their bodies.

Start by observing children at play. "Young children move beautifully," says Ben-Yehuda. "They typically have great, upright posture." Make mental notes about how they walk, run, sit and stand. Next, watch the adults around you—your husband, friends, co-workers or neighbors. "When you start to become aware of other people's alignment, it can clue you in to the tweaks you need to make," says Ben-Yehuda. Another idea: Have someone snap a photo of you when you're sitting or standing—without your knowing. If you notice you're slouching or standing with more weight on one leg, it'll clue you in to your bad habit, which is the first step toward breaking it.

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