

Mindful Walking for Life

- Written by Dr. Steven Weiniger



We take moving and walking for granted. But loss of spinal motion—whether from a sudden back injury or from a gradual loss with growing older—can rob us of the simple pleasure of taking a stroll. And since studies show the benefits of regular walking, it's smart to take a look at how we walk and to be mindful of moving well.

Most of us never take the time to focus on subtle asymmetries between sides as we step from our left foot to the right. But chiropractors, therapists, and trainers know back pain, as well as ankle and knee problems, often result from the long-term muscle and joint stress of quirks in how we stand and walk.

Increasingly, professionals use a new breed of “motion control exercise” (MCE) to treat people and literally improve how they move. In a recent meta-study, or study of other studies, MCE were found to “correct these deficiencies and retrain optimal movement patterns and control of spinal motion...and are superior to general exercise in the treatment of chronic and recurrent low back pain with regard to pain and disability.”

According to posture and motion professionals, moving well begins with improving body awareness and then training better control of fine, subtle movement. Before beginning a motion control program, it's a good idea to benchmark your standing body alignment with a posture picture. It's easy—just have a friend take your standing, full-body picture with a camera or phone and keep it to compare it to another picture annually or after a posture improvement program. (TIP: Check-out the free PostureZone app for iPhone/iPad available from iTunes.)

Here's a three step strategy for improving how you move from posture expert, Dr. Steven Weiniger, author of *Stand*

Taller~Live Longer: An Anti- Aging Strategy. Especially if you sit a lot, he recommends these simple steps to get started walking taller and with better control.

STANDING AWARENESS

Your standing posture is an indicator of how your body is balancing. When you walk, you are constantly shifting your balance from the left to the right, so the first step in awareness is taking a moment to focus on what it feels like to balance only on one side.

Simply stand tall and raise your left leg so your thigh is parallel to the ground. Hold this position for 20 or 30 seconds (or as long as you can comfortably maintaining control). Note which muscles are working hardest to keep you balanced. Repeat on the other side and note any differences.

BODY AWARENESS

Certified posture exercise professionals (CPEP) help retrain motion by looking at the body as four PostureZones: Head, Torso, Pelvis, and Lower extremities. They observe how we unconsciously shift those zones, often out of proper alignment, in order to keep our balance.

You can increase body awareness with this simple DIY movement assessment sequence:

- Zone 1 - Lower Extremities: Stand on your toes; then lift your toes to stand on your heels. Roll your feet to the outside edge and then to the inside edge. Try lifting your pinky toe off the ground. Now, bend your left knee, keeping your right knee straight. Then bend your right knee keeping your left knee straight.
- Zone 2 - Pelvis: Stand tall with knees locked and then move your hips as far as you can to the right, then as far as you can to the left, then forward, and then backward.
- Zone 3 - Torso: Explore the motion of your spine by carefully bending to the left and then to the right. Keep your knees locked and bend gently backwards. Note how far back you can see, and then check your motion and flexibility bending forward.
- Zone 4 - Head: Look left, right, up, and down. Compare the sensation and note any asymmetry or unevenness in how you move on each side.

WALKING AWARENESS

Go for a stroll and be aware if it feels the same when you step out with your left foot and then the right.

Note your symmetry in each PostureZone as you focus on your:

- Feet: Is the same part of the toes pressing into the ground as you step forward on each side? Is the same part of each heel striking?
- Torso: Is each arm swinging symmetrically and the same distance? Do both hands face the same direction (thumb forward)? When you take a breath, are you belly-breathing or chest breathing?
- Head: Is your head jutting forward or level and standing tall?

Explore how it feels to move differently and play with evening out and balancing any left-right PostureZone differences you find. If you have a problem or there's any pain, check with your doctor or posture exercise professional.

Simply becoming aware is a huge step in the right direction. A bit of mindfulness as you move helps keep your spine and posture strong to keep you walking tall and moving well.

Dr. Steven Weiniger is a posture expert and author of Stand Taller~Live Longer: An Anti- Aging Strategy. For more information on why strong posture is crucial for longevity and living an active life, visit www.BodyZone.com.