

# Stand up straight! Stop slouching!

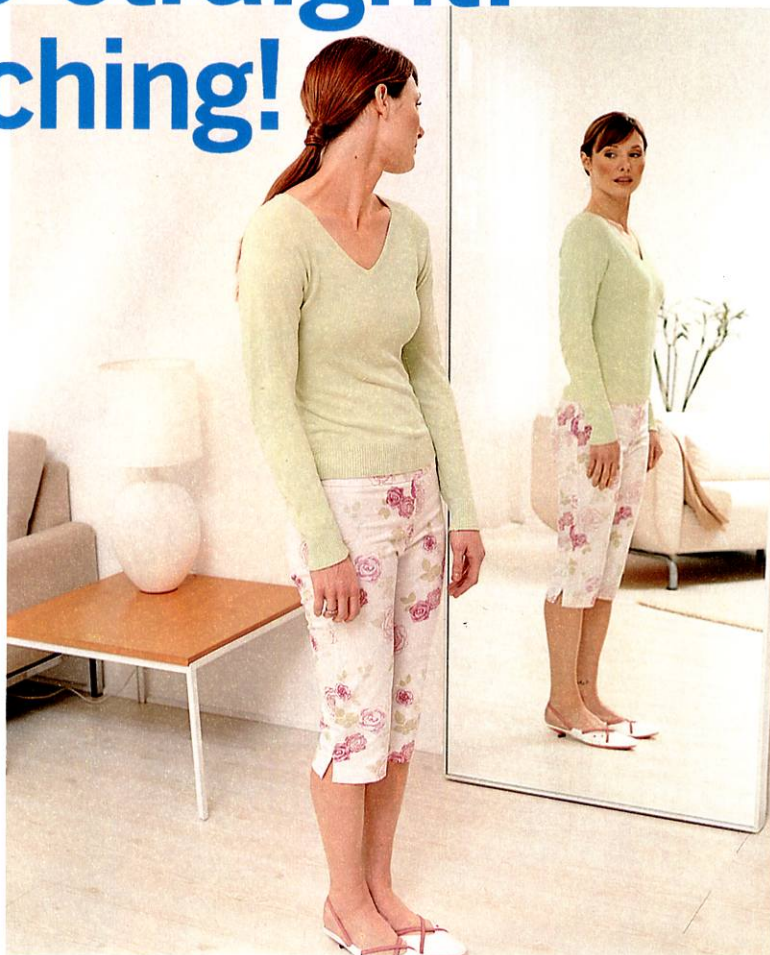
You've heard it from your mother. Now **Dr. Nancy Snyderman** explains how easy it is to improve your posture—and why you'll feel (and look) so much better.

It was a typical scene at my house: the five of us sitting at the dining-room table, talking about what we had done that day. As usual, my daughter Rachel had assumed the classic adolescent slump (she was 14 at the time)—her shoulders were dropped so far forward, her head was practically in her plate. And as usual, my husband could not resist telling her to stop slouching. (My father used to harp on me for the same thing.) I'm not crazy about Rachel's slumping either. And as a doctor, I know it not only looks unattractive, it also causes aches, pains, poor mobility, stiffness, and tight breathing.

How? Slouching puts pressure on your vertebrae, ultimately causing discs to become compressed and making you vulnerable to back pain. Pelvic muscles go slack, which makes it even harder to support a well-aligned stance, especially as you get older. Nerves in your neck are pinched, too, tightening muscles there and causing tension headaches.

Good posture, on the other hand, makes you feel good. Your muscles are more limber, and you have better mobility and less tension in your neck and shoulders. Your back and legs are relaxed, your spine feels longer. And the physiological boost carries over to a sense of psychological well-being.

So how do you know if you're standing right? You can



undergo a high-tech posture analysis (see page 57). But there's a simpler way, too, which Rachel and I tried. First I had her stand in front of a full-length mirror and assume her usual stance. I wasn't surprised to see her shoulders round somewhat and fall forward. Her pelvis rotated back, and her lower spine became hollow. I stood behind her and gently pulled her shoulders back while she tucked her pelvis forward. She immediately looked an inch taller. Then I had Rachel close her eyes and feel the weight of her head as she moved it slowly in a circle and noted the pull on her neck muscles in various positions. She kept at it until she found the sweet spot where her head rested comfortably, without any pull.

Next Rachel turned sideways, and we started all over again. Ideally, you want to have a straight line that touches at your ear, shoulder, hip, back of your knee, and ►

ankle. You can check for this using a string and weight. To make this plumb line, I simply attached a pair of scissors to a six-foot length of twine. Holding the free end of the string just above Rachel's ear, and letting the scissors rest on the floor, I had her take her new—correct—stance. Sure enough, the string connected exactly where it was supposed to. "Remember the feeling," I told her.

The last assignment was to find the right position for sitting. Rachel spends hours at the computer doing homework (and, of course, instant-messaging her friends). She usually has her legs crossed while she leans forward. I'm just as bad. I have a terrible habit of pulling my shoulders up when I am typing, so that by the end of the day, my neck is tight and my shoulders ache.

How do you break these habits? Imagine a pulley coming out of the top of your head. Pull that cable upward and feel your spine stretch while you drop your shoulders and nudge your shoulder blades back toward each other. This will push your chest up and open up your rib cage, making it easier to breathe.

Now find your sitting bones—sneak your hands under your backside and you'll be able to feel two bones pushing down into your hands. Overarch your back and these bones will push off your hands. Lean back too far on the fat part of your buttocks and they will slide forward. Sit centered and they will rest in the middle—where they should be. To get the right support, you need a good chair too; choose a firm, high-backed model with armrests and lumbar support.

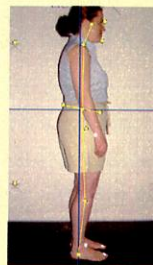
When I am in the operating room for hours on end, I have a lot of tricks to take the pressure off my shoulders, back, and feet. I always wear comfortable shoes—in my case, clogs, so I can slide my feet in and out. I shift my weight from one foot to the other and every once in a while, I pick up a foot and bend my knee to keep the blood circulating. Perhaps most important, I raise the operating table up so that my arms rest with a natural bend at the elbow. This way, I don't have to stoop over, straining my neck and lower back.

I've done the same in my kitchen. When we renovated, I set my countertops at 38 inches from the floor (the conventional height is only 36 inches). Now, when I spend hours putting together a meal, my back doesn't have to pay the price.

As you get older, good posture will keep your body flexible and help maintain your balance. And at any age (are you listening, Rachel?), the way you stand tells people volumes about who you are. Self-assured people walk tall and have a commanding presence when they enter a room—a presence that is both comfortable and confident. ■

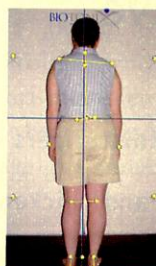
For improve-your-posture exercises, go to [goodhousekeeping.com](http://goodhousekeeping.com)

## In pain? This posture test may tell you why



When I lifted my three-year-old son so he could grab an apple dangling on a high branch last October, I felt a twinge in my lower back. *Not again*, I thought. The twinge became an ache, and by morning, I couldn't tie my shoes for the agony.

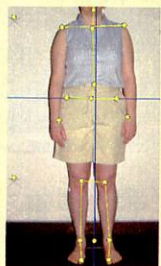
Back pain—in my case, from a bulging disc—can be triggered by lifting kids or even a bag of groceries. But I wouldn't be so susceptible to flare-ups if I didn't have "structural problems," as my physical therapist put it. After a few months, the pain subsided. But I still had my underlying problem: bad posture. I didn't know how bad until I underwent a digital posture analysis at the Manhattan Spine & Sports Medicine center. (These exams are available at physical therapy and spine centers across the country for about \$200.) I stood in



front of a large digital camera, with some 20 reflective stickers attached to my knees, back, arms, and chin. Feeling like a Christmas tree getting a mug shot, I turned backward, forward, and sideways for the pictures.

When I returned for my report, the computer program had literally connected the dots, pinpointing places where my body alignment was out of whack. The bottom line: My head juts forward 20 degrees (zero is ideal), and my right shoulder measures 2.4 degrees lower than my left. Drew DeMann, M.D., the chiropractic orthopedist who heads up the spine center, wasn't surprised. "These numbers are very common for women your age," he said. My head sticks out, rounding my shoulders, because of years of working at a desk, he explained. As for the uneven shoulder, it probably came from carrying fussy babies on the same side as I walked them—and walked them—to sleep.

The same software that produced my report helped



Dr. DeMann come up with a series of exercises that he promised would improve my posture in two months. I haven't been doing the workouts long enough to see a difference. But I hope that next fall, when I lift my son to the upper branches, the only "pull" will come when he yanks the apple from the tree. —Sheila O'Neill