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Sit Up Straight: A Cure for Back Pain Can Be as Simple as Good Posture

IT TURNS OUT your mother was right: good posture does matter.

A growing number of medical complaints—ranging from headaches and neck pain to lower back, knee and feet problems—may be solved by simple improvements in posture. Doctors around the country say they are seeing an increasing number of posture-related health problems, mostly stemming from the fact that more people are spending hours at a time hunched over computer keyboards. Convincing patients that poor posture is the cause of their debilitating migraines or excruciating back pain can be tough. Obviously many painful conditions are related to physical problems like arthritis or injury. But a surprising amount of pain that can't be explained by other means is due to posture, a condition known as “postural derangement. Patients “want an MRI, they want to look for a herniated disk,” says Daniel Mazanec, medical director of the Cleveland Clinic Spine Institute, “They say it's too simple, that it can't be just posture.” Poor posture triggers a cascade of tiny structural changes and shifts throughout the body that can have painful consequences. The person begins to push the shoulders, neck and head forward, tilt the pelvis and shift the spine, putting added pressure on muscles and

joints. Some experts are using digital photography and specially designed computer programs similar to that used by professional athletes to improve form and performance. The images graphically illustrate the odd angles and position in which many of us have begun to carry our bodies.

“People come in all the time and say my knees hurt, my back hurts, my shoulder hurts,” says chiropractic sports physician Drew DeMann, director of Manhattan Spine & Sports Medicine where he uses the photo technology. “But if you look at it from a very mechanical perspective it makes perfect sense.”

Wearing snugfitting clothes, the patient stands in a relaxed position in front of a grid-marked board. The doctor dots the body with reflective stickers on the shoulders, knees, navel, spine, chin and other body parts, then takes a digital picture. The image is fed into a computer program, which draws lines connecting the dots and calculates various angles and positions.

Although nobody is perfectly straight or symmetrical, the images do help identify areas that are clearly out of whack. As a longtime complainer of neck and shoulder pain, I had my own posture evaluated with the camera technology. I was stunned to see that I carry my head at a 20-degree forward angle rather than vertical. The awkward position has the effect of forcing my neck muscles to bear twice the weight than they otherwise would a problem that

could be corrected with simple stretching and strengthening exercises.

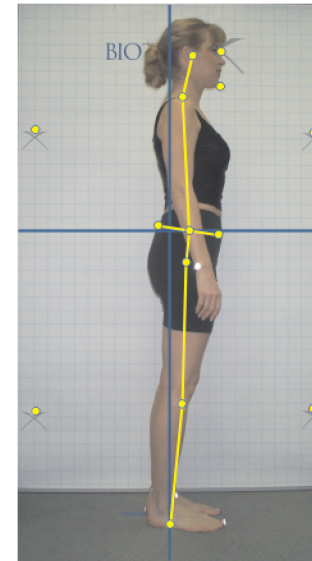
About five months ago, 43 year-old fitness instructor Joe Ogilvie sought chiropractic care to treat his aching lower back and tight neck and shoulders. The camera images showed he was carrying one shoulder significantly lower than another and had a bigger-than-usual tilt to his pelvis. The prescription: to stop lugging a heavy computer bag, use better posture while working at a computer and begin a stretching regimen. After 10 weeks, his pain was “much relieved,” says Mr. Ogilvie, who works in both Manhattan and Lenox, Mass. “I was surprised how much the pictures revealed.”

The biggest surprise about treating posture problems is how relatively easy they are to correct with exercises. “While a person is sitting there in the first five minutes, I correct their seated posture and many times they will say,

“Well, that feels much better,” says Dr. Mazanec. “For most people, if they're faithful with exercise and attention to posture, within six weeks you can substantially improve symptoms.”

To start, a few simple habits, like taking five-second breaks from computer work to stand up, stretch and take a few deep breaths, can help. To get a feeling for what good posture is, think of the military cadet standing at attention with his or her hands resting in the small of the back, shoulders and hear pulled back and spine straight.

But lasting improvements will come only with



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regular exercises that stretch and lengthen the spine, loosen up tight hip muscles and strengthen abdominal muscles to take more load off the back.

Yoga- and Pilates-based exercises, which emphasize stretching and strengthening muscles, often are recommended to improve posture problems. Although research is limited, there is some evidence that the methods can solve back pain and other problems. In a small pilot study of older women who have developed a hump in the back, regular yoga helped them stand taller and improved their reach, function and mobility, says Gail Greendale, professor at the David Geffen School of Medicine at University of California Los Angeles. Vijay Vad, sports-medicine specialist at the Hospital for Special Surgery in Manhattan, has studied a yoga- and Pilates-based exercise program that offers dramatic improvement for participants compared with back-pain sufferers who take only pain medication.

The key is to stick with it so the problems don't return. “Look at the position people spend the whole day in they're sitting and bending forward doing their work,” says Dr. Vad. “That tends to be a pattern set in your brain. We have to unprogram that.”

E-mail me at healthjournal@wsj.com.