

Posture, Exercise, and Your Neck Pain

By Joe Waller, MPT, cert SMT, CMTPT
Orthopedic & Spine Therapy of Waupaca

When your mother told you to sit up straight she wasn't just blowing hot air. She was trying to protect you by conveying conventional wisdom. Poor posture has been implicated as one of several primary factors leading to the development of neck pain. The economic burden associated with the treatment of neck pain is second only to low back pain in annual workers' compensation costs in the United States. It is theorized that abnormal postural loading causes early muscle fatigue, increases displacement stress on joints, and leads to pain and loss of function. Over time these stresses create the conditions which lead to the development of painful trigger points within muscle, painful joint restrictions, chronic pain syndromes and arthritic conditions.

In the case of posture, conventional wisdom reveals only a partial truth. What about the individual who can sustain poor postural positioning and never develops pain? And what of the individual that actually has more pain when sitting up straight? The answer is that we all respond differently to the spectrum of stresses in our lives and over time these responses cause compensations that shape our ability to tolerate various levels of activity. There are subgroups of individuals where poor posture certainly plays a primary role in the development of their pain syndrome. There are other subgroups in which underlying muscle dysfunction and/or joint dysfunction can lead to the observed poor posture. Blaming posture for your neck pain is an overly simplistic approach to what is more often a complicated, multi-layered problem.

Recent evidence brings into question the precise roll of posture in individuals with neck pain. When researchers tried to correlate the presence of neck pain with poor posture they found individuals were just as likely to develop neck pain regardless of their posture. From this we can hypothesize that poor posture may be both a causative factor and a symptom of the very underlying issues it has been implicated in causing – joint restriction, muscle weakness and fatigue, and trigger points.

This realization is significant. It explains why treatment programs for neck pain, that focus on restoring “normal” posture solely through exercising or stabilizing postural muscles, often fail. Mechanical restrictions in spinal joints have been shown to inhibit, or “weaken”, adjacent back muscles. These same joint restrictions can also create trigger points in muscles important to postural stability and endurance. Muscles with trigger points, or those inhibited by joint dysfunction, can actually become weaker when subjected to typical strengthening protocols — leading to more pain and dysfunction. Individuals with neck pain falling into any subgroup demonstrating joint or muscle dysfunction need a more sophisticated approach than can be provided through exercise therapy alone.

Manual physical therapy interventions are effective in the treatment of joint restrictions and associated muscle dysfunction. By treating these underlying issues first, and eliminating their impact on overall function, exercise programs become more effective. Without the influence of

restricted joint motion and painful muscle dysfunction the ability to assume and maintain “good” posture improves, the incremental effects of sustained postures experienced at work and in the home are diminished, and mechanical stresses can be more effectively dissipated.

Anyone experiencing neck pain, or any other muscle or joint pain, can schedule a free screening with a physical therapist at any Orthopedic and Spine Therapy location. Your condition will be evaluated, and if joint restriction and muscle dysfunction is discovered, the physical therapists at Orthopedic and Spine Therapy have advanced training in the manual therapies most effective in resolving these issues. If sitting up straight just doesn't give you the relief it may have in the past, call and schedule your free screening. Your body will thank you.

Keywords: posture, poor posture, neck pain, low back pain, pain, trigger points, chronic pain syndromes, physical therapy, exercise programs