

How To Stand Up Straight

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Do you feel you should be standing up straighter? So many people have asked me about this over the years that I can explain how in under one minute.

Standing up straight is a simple thing that gets harder and harder to do as we grow older. The first thing you should know is that what parents, teachers, and drill sergeants have always said would fix it – pull your shoulders back! – doesn't work. It sometimes even makes matters worse by moving the weight of your arms so far back that you have to poke your head forward to compensate, ending up even more stooped. And it always increases the level of tension in your body, making you feel stiffer and move more slowly.

Tracing the problem to its origin – literally looking to see where the bending forward begins in the body – nearly always reveals that the hips are the most flexed, tilting the trunk forward from the tailbone up.

This is because most of us spend a majority of the day sitting, and our muscles and nervous system adjust to hip joints bent roughly 90 degrees as the “normal” state. Consequently, straightening them out to stand gets more and more difficult, and we end up more and more bent forward when we're on our feet.

So if you want to stand up straighter, the most important thing to do is to fully straighten up at the hips. Your shoulders will generally take care of themselves once this becomes natural.

At Intelligent Exercise, we've discovered many effective techniques to help our clients stand tall by instinctively straightening their hips. Here are some of them, divided into the two main things we do: movement education and exercise.

Movement Education

In order to stop doing something, you have to be able to feel that you are doing it. So the first step to help someone who stands with flexed hips is to help them learn how to flex their hips on purpose, so they can recognize the feeling and develop control over it.

An excellent way to do this is to practice bowing. Holding onto the back of a chair makes this safer, and having another soft, heavy chair or sofa behind for a soft landing in case of a fall makes it safer still. Bow like a classical musician or a martial artist, bending at the hips, moving the bottom backwards as

the head goes forwards, and shifting the weight onto the heels. Just a little bit will do. Gentle exploration of this movement will show that it can be done safely and with good balance when the head and the buttocks counterbalance each other. There should be no tension involved.

Once you can feel how to bow, you can feel how to stop bowing (that is, to stand fully upright) by bringing your bottom back underneath, moving your whole spine to do it so that their head is lifted up.

Exercise

While exercise is in no way a substitute for learning how to move well, it can act like a vitamin supplement, enriching the normal range of day to day activities with kinds of movement otherwise missing.

In the case of a flexed posture, there's normally a deficiency of movements that extend the hip joints, and a good exercise routine can fill the gap. Fortunately, exercises that extend the hip joints are multitude. Standing up from a chair is a good basic exercise, and squats are the more advanced version. Other functional exercises are walking uphill or on an inclined treadmill, and walking up stairs, stepping up onto a step, or using a stair-stepping machine. ("Real" movements like walking up stairs are always healthier and more effective than their machine facsimiles for reasons I'll write about in a future article.)

Lifting and straightening a leg up to trunk height while on hands and knees exactly targets the essential muscles, and doing the same thing standing up holding onto the back of the chair is an adaptation that works for people whose balance is unsure or who can't easily get on hands and knees.

Simple quadriceps and hip flexor stretches help lengthen the muscles that flex the hips and are a good maintenance practice after any kind of exercise. Due to the emphasis on hamstring stretching in recent years, quadriceps and hip flexor stretches are missing from too many fitness routines.

If you'd like more help with this – or with feeling better and functioning better at any age – Intelligent Exercise trainers are available to work one-on-one with you in your home or office. We make house calls throughout Manhattan and in parts of Brooklyn. To schedule an appointment or for more information, call 646-256-4414 or email jae@intelligentexercise.com.

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