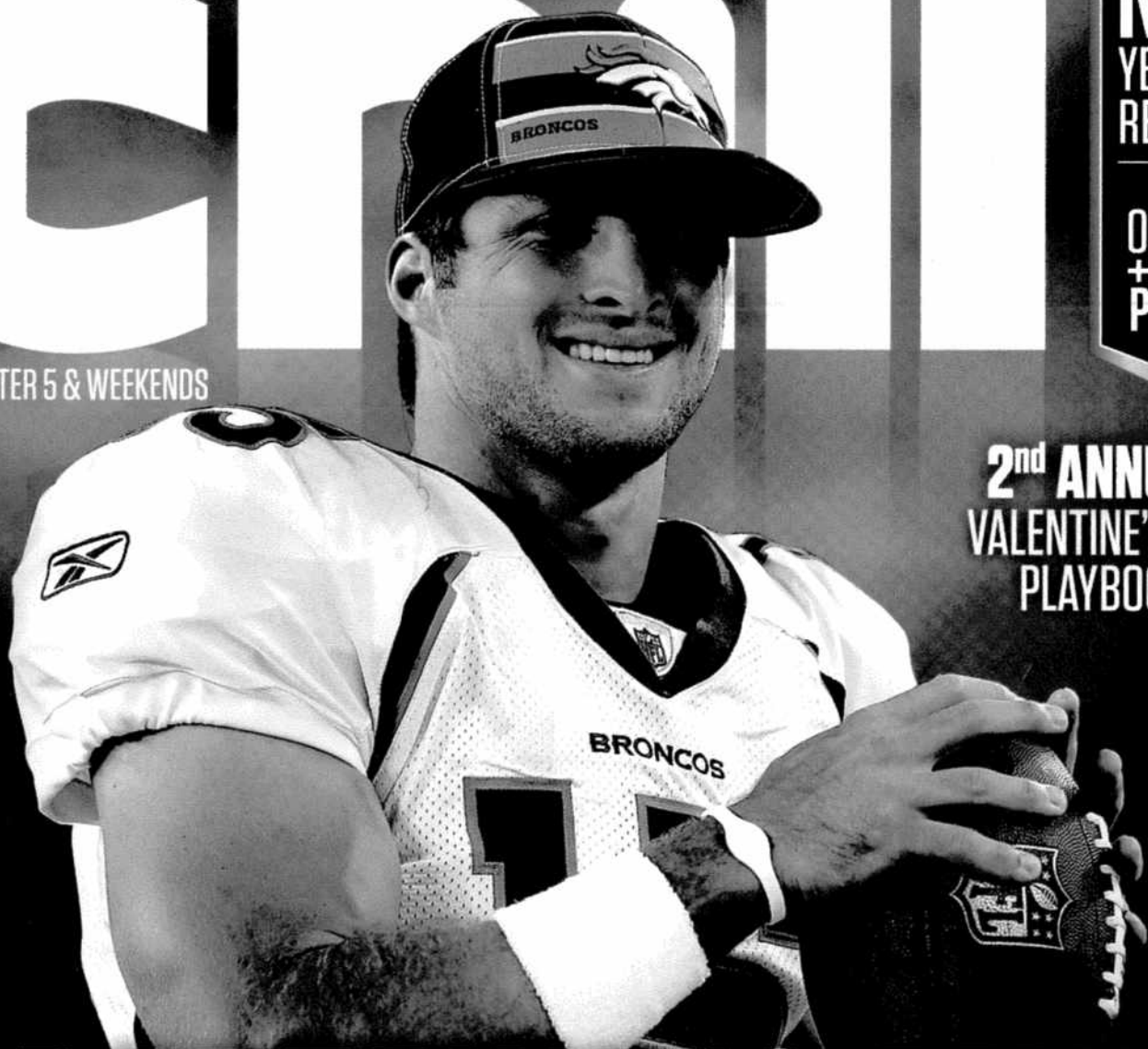


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STAND TALL

THE IMPORTANCE OF POSTURE

by Jeffrey Renaud

While it's unlikely Burton Cummings was singing about proper posture back in 1976, his words ring true when considering the collective slouch that Canadians exhibit when sitting, standing or walking: "Stand tall, don't you fall. Don't you do something you might regret later."



POS·TURE

PäsCHər (n.)

A position of a person's body when standing or sitting: "good posture will protect your spine."

Okay, not everyone has poor posture. True enough. But look around. Or look at yourself. How are you sitting right now? Is your back pressed firmly against the back of your chair for greater support of your spine? Are your knees positioned at a 90 degree angle and your feet flat on the floor? And what about when you're standing? Do your hips, head, shoulders and ankles line up?

Not likely, considering that poor posture is tied closely to back pain and Health Canada estimates that 80 percent of Canadians will suffer from back pain at some point in their lives. The numbers are certainly not in your favour. And, if you don't believe "Dr." Cummings, maybe you'll listen to Dr. Melanie Locke, a Toronto-based chiropractor, who assists with public awareness for the Canadian Memorial Chiropractic College and the Ontario Chiropractic Association.

"Proper posture plays an important role in preventing back pain, neck pain and other musculoskeletal problems, and it can help to maintain your overall health," says Locke. "Good posture contributes to increased energy, better breathing, improved circulation and it can even make you look taller and slimmer."

The secret to good posture is understanding and maintaining the balance among the spine's four natural curves, says Locke, who adds that people with proper posture seem to move with greater confidence and grace than those who slouch.

"When you look at the spine from the side, we actually have two forward curves, in our neck and our lower back, and two backward curves in the middle of the back and the base of the spine. Those curves of the spine give it resilience and absorb impact," explains Locke. "If the curves are too flat, ligaments and muscles have to take extra load and this can result in strain and pain. If the curves are too accentuated, the spine can't distribute the body's weight effectively. Either way, movement becomes more difficult and that drains the body's energy."

Along with standing straight, Locke says it helps if your knees are just slightly bent and if you have your feet about shoulder width apart, which will provide you with a good comfortable base.

Most of us, not all of us, but most of us have a variety of bad habits that lead to poor posture, including carrying a heavy bag or a briefcase on one shoulder to and from work, cradling the phone between the shoulder and the ear when crushing that final sale of the day and falling asleep on the sofa after a hard day at the office.

Any of these activities can give you a stiff neck and aggravate your spine, says Locke.

"If you must use a bag or briefcase with a single strap, we recommend that you make sure the strap is padded and try to choose a strap that's long enough to place over the head to rest on the opposite side of the bag or the briefcase because that helps distribute the weight more evenly," explains Locke. "It's not ideal but it's better than having all the load on one side of the body which can distort the spine throwing it out of alignment. The best way is to have the load evenly distributed, like a back pack with two straps."

Good posture is just as important when you are sitting as when you are standing, especially when sitting in any

"GOOD POSTURE CONTRIBUTES TO INCREASED ENERGY, BETTER BREATHING, IMPROVED CIRCULATION AND IT CAN EVEN MAKE YOU LOOK TALLER AND SLIMMER."

one position for an extended period of time.

"It's important to position your lower back against the back of your chair to obtain the greatest amount of support for your spine," offers Locke, who suggests that those with desk jobs should do a quick stretch at least every 45 minutes. "And a lumbar roll can also be used for added support. What we recommend is to avoid leaning your backrest too far backwards, try to adjust the height of your chair so that your knees are positioned at approximately a 90 degree angle and your feet are flat on the floor."

Many of these same rules apply when you are behind the wheel of your car or truck during that long commute back to suburbia.

Don't position your seat so far back that you look like an extra from *Fast and the Furious*. And get your wallet out of your back pocket, Costanza.

"One of the first things we do when assessing a patient's posture while seated is check to see if they carry a wallet in their back pocket, and if they do, we tell them to get it out of there. Left in, it hikes up the pelvis on one side creating an imbalance in the hips, which can affect the spine. And because muscles are attached to the spine, muscles get stretched on one side in an awkward way and tightened on the other side, resulting in altered spinal alignment, leading to poor posture and pain. Typically, we spend so much of our days sitting, so it's important to have a balanced base of support. Keep your wallet in your front pocket or your coat pocket - anywhere other than the back pocket. That will make a big difference to improving posture and contributing to good health."

If these helpful hints don't do the trick for your slouch, Dr. Locke or any other Ontario chiropractor listed on the Ontario Chiropractic Association website (chiropractic.on.ca/locator.aspx) is available to assist with some more home remedies or perhaps even an adjustment.

Resolve to improve your posture. Check out Chill's top 5 tips for improving your posture. Visit:

 ichill.ca/healthyhabits