

# Take a stance

Christian Platts, MFHT, looks at the importance of good posture and provides some simple exercises

Poor posture is one of the main causes of chronic pain and dysfunction and it is widely recognised that achieving good posture can play a key role in eliminating these problems.

Many studies point to the fact that the biggest cause of back pain in the office now relates to people 'trying to sit correctly' and more often than not, failing. With so much misinformation, it is no wonder that the public are often baffled and despondent about their posture.

I believe every therapist should make it a goal to know how to analyse and treat common postural imbalances. The first question we should ask ourselves is 'what is a good posture'? Immediately, we straighten our spines and lift up our heads. This is a natural reaction, however the essence of achieving good posture is totally reliant upon an aligned skeletal system – one where the musculoskeletal and fascial system works with the force of gravity, rather than against it.

Your central line of gravity is a line of force, which, when you move or stand, works to pull you to the ground. To prevent the scaffolding of the body (the skeleton) from falling under the pressure of gravity, it relies on the soft tissue to hold each of the bones in place and assist in the even distribution of the body weight in order to keep us upright.

Carrying the weight of the body could be a potentially exhausting job for the soft tissue, yet a natural, good posture achieves this with ease. This is because our body has the ability to transmit its weight through the skeletal system and ground our weight to the floor. A poor posture needs to constantly recruit soft tissue to keep us upright, and it is this repetitive, excessive 'grabbing' that could be the cause of your client's discomfort.

When a client comes to you with aching shoulders, a chronic knee problem, or an aching lower back, ask yourself, why is this pain evident? Why is it only on the one side? What is the reason for this imbalance? Is the site of pain overworking to carry the client's body? You will find most of your client's chronic pains, possibly acute pains (and interestingly, any emotional conflicts) are directly related to the way the soft tissue is carrying the body against the force of gravity.

As therapists, we are so used to determining the health of tissue by



Above: Posture stretch 1 start and end

its texture and working to create an improvement to the muscles' feel. But take this one step further and think about how the client's posture is creating this 'unhealthy' muscle tone. It is at this point that you can start to rectify their complaints, and rid yourself of the frustration of clients returning month after month with the same unease.

We all have a variety of skills in our toolbox that we call upon to achieve the same goal, namely to improve tone, circulation and dysfunction; clear away waste that is storing in the body; open up energetic and neurological pathways; and improve flexibility by creating ease.

Often, these techniques prove successful in effecting long-term change. However, for those clients who don't look after their diet, don't exercise, don't sleep well, have horrific amounts of stress in their life, and don't take care of themselves in general, you may have to look deeper to discover what is underpinning their complaint. To help get these clients back on track, and for every client who suffers with their posture, here are six simple, effective stretches that will take no more than 20 minutes to complete. Done regularly, they can help to bring about marked improvements to long-term postural dysfunction, and thus chronic aches and pains.

Normal contraindications apply as always, so continued thoroughness in your consultation goes without saying. For pre-exercise stretches, keep the stretch held for 15 seconds and repeat three times. For progressive developmental stretches, hold for up to 30 seconds and repeat three times. In all cases, it is vital to check for any reasons why these stretches may be contraindicated. If unsure, seek advice.

## Stretch 1

Many believe that the functioning of the psoas is directly responsible for the positioning of the pelvis, and that the pelvis is at the core of every dysfunction of the body and mind. As such, it is essential to give this muscle the attention that is needed. This daily stretch can really help to unblock the restrictions that hold the pelvis in a rotated and/or tilted position, and can take the pelvis into neutral alignment.

Lay on your back with your gluteals positioned towards the edge of the couch. Take one leg and hold the knee against your chest. With the opposite leg, push your foot towards the floor and hold the stretch. Repeat for the other side.

## Stretch 2

This stretch can, in time, alleviate any lateral shift to the pelvis. When the pelvis is balanced the body can rely on the skeletal system as the weight bearer for the upper body and the even distributor of this weight for the lower body. This area is responsible for the vast amount of shrinkage we experience as we age. Keeping this space open is vital for the organs, and for the nerves that feed from the lumbar vertebrae.

Standing feet apart, push your hips to the right side, then take your right arm overhead to the left side, bend and hold. Repeat for the other side.

## Stretch 3

This stretch rotates the ribcage. In the past four years I have assessed only four clients with a neutral pelvis – the other several hundred all had some imbalance in this area.

If the pelvis is not in a state to carry the upper body weight, then muscles are relied upon constantly to hold up the ribcage. Invariably, these muscles contract over their lifetime and slowly start to lose the battle against gravity. The ribcage then travels south and more often than not, rotates and



**Left: Posture stretch 2**  
**Above: Posture stretch 4**  
**Below: Posture stretch 3 start and end**

locks in an imbalanced position, taking the neck and shoulders with it. Very few people do enough, if any, rotational movements, so this stretch is great to free the ribcage and increase mobility of the area that is home to our most vital organs. Alongside Stretch 4, this stretch will help to balance the ribcage position and free restrictions in the thoracic vertebra.

Stand with feet apart and arms extended. Ensure elbows are locked straight (this is essential throughout the stretch). Take the arms to the left and hold the stretch, then repeat on the other side. Make sure the pelvis does not rotate and is stabilised, facing forwards throughout.

**Stretch 4**

This stretch is great for opening the ribs, and taking the shoulders and head back. It can be a meditative, almost relaxing stretch.

Be aware that pins and needles can be experienced after a short time – if this occurs, regress the stretch of the pectorals by bending at the elbows. If this does not help, take the arms down by the side of the body.

Lie on your back with a rolled up towel or bolster directly under the spine. Take your arms out to the side and relax in this position. Also bend your knees and focus on relaxing your abdomen, which can assist with the relaxation of the psoas muscle. Lie in this position for five to 10 minutes per day.

**Stretch 5**

Rotation of the femur at the joint can assist in unblocking acquired leg length discrepancies, and can free this multi-functional joint to improve range of movement that may have been locked up over the years through poor posture.

Lie on your back and raise your foot toward the ceiling until you feel a gentle stretch through the hamstrings,

then aim to rotate your straightened knee medially. Ensure you do not rotate your pelvis or tilt your foot. Unlike the previous stretches, hold this stretch for two seconds, and do three sets of 10 repetitions for a dynamic stretch approach.

**Stretch 6**

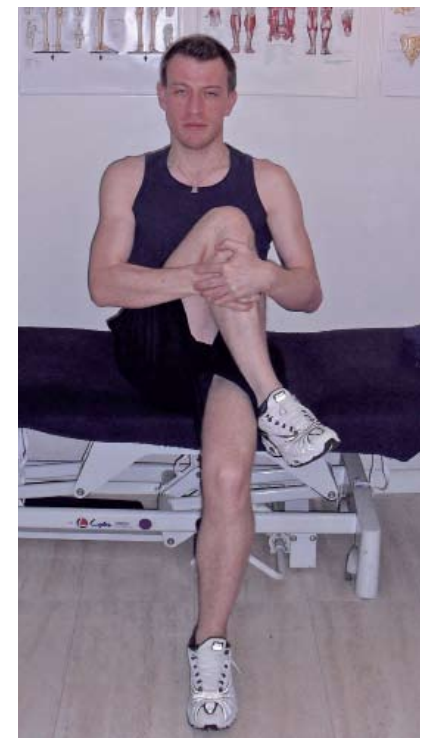
The gluteals are a main source of tension for the lower back and legs. Excessive carrying of upper body weight through this muscle group, when the pelvis and/or ribcage are imbalanced, can really tighten the muscles and cause blockages to occur in the sciatic nerve, and circulatory and lymphatic system. This overuse can cause pain and inflexibility in the hips.

Stretch the majority of your gluteal muscles by pulling your knee across your body, and hold.

For the vast number of clients, and the therapist, these simple daily exercises can really shift all kinds of blockages and restraints, and help you with those less responsive clients. I believe poor posture is at the route of many issues with the body. See these stretches as a holistic route for all your clients, to help them improve and prevent the damaging effects of one the strongest forces known: Gravity.



**Below: Posture stretch 5 start and end**



**Above: Posture stretch 6**

**Christian Platts** is a director of Active Health Group. He has also developed and teaches myofascial release courses and has been in private practice for nearly 10 years. See Christian being interviewed about MFR on the practice website ([www.citytherapy.org](http://www.citytherapy.org)) To download this article as a free client handout, please visit [www.activehealthgroup.org.uk](http://www.activehealthgroup.org.uk)