

Good Posture and a Good Fitting Bra – What is the Connection?

What is Good Posture?

Firstly, what is good posture? Obtaining and maintaining *Good Posture* is a delicate balancing act one, which involves muscles, joints, and the brain and nerve pathways that control them. When you have the correct posture you are protecting your body from injury whether you are sitting at a desk all day or doing a gym class.

From the side you should imagine a vertical line drawn from your ear through your shoulder joint, trunk, hip, knee and ankle (see photo 1). From the back your ears, shoulders, pelvis and knees should all be level (see photo 2).

Causes of Poor Posture

There are many factors that can alter your posture such as everyday stress, pain, injury and bad postural habits. These temporary stressors change the way we look and the way we move. More worrying is that the temporary changes left unchecked over time may become fixed. There may be permanent changes to the length and strength of muscles, joints become stiff or unstable and the permanent adoption of poor static and dynamic movement patterns.

Breasts

Breasts sit on top of your chest muscles (the Pectoral Muscles) and the only structures that provide them with support are ligaments - a type of connective tissue (Cooper's Ligaments) that runs from the nipples to the pectoral muscles and the skin, which provides a secondary support.

Without the support of a good fitting bra, these structures will stretch over time – a phenomena called “creep” and this is what leads to sagging breasts. Furthermore, the weight of the unsupported breasts pulls the shoulders and head forward changing the length and workload on the muscles and compromising the joints in the spine.

Good Posture and a Good Fitting Bra – What is the Connection?

One of the most common mistakes that can lead to poor posture and yet can be easily fixed is wearing an ill-fitting bra. Don't make the mistake that because you are not a more generously endowed woman that this doesn't concern you – it concerns *every woman*.

A recent study in Australia found that between 70-100% of the young women they assessed were wearing a bra that was the wrong size! We all know what it looks like when we wear the wrong sized shirt or pants but wearing the wrong sized bra is worse as you are potentially causing yourself harm.

A Poorly Fitting Bra May be Literally “A Pain in the Neck”

Common postural problems such as tension headaches and slouched posture, may be exacerbated by an ill-fitting bra and there is growing evidence to suggest that an incorrectly fitted bra may in turn lead to poor posture.

Shoulder straps that are the incorrect length or too narrow can compress the trigger points of muscles that connect the shoulders to the neck and this in turn may lead to a feeling of muscle tension, neck pain and even headaches. So, every woman who suffers from neck and shoulder pain should first take a long hard look at the bra they are wearing.

The correct bra will not magically fix your posture or cure your neck pain, but it will go a long way to supporting you and encouraging you to remain in a more upright posture.

A Good Fitting Bra – The Posture Plus Bra Checklist

The following information outlines what features you should look for when next shopping for a bra.

- 1. *Shoulder Straps:*** The shoulder straps should be adjustable and not too narrow. This is especially important if you have a larger breast size, as narrow straps cause the weight of the breast to cut into your neck and shoulder muscles. The straps should be firm to give a slight lift to the breast but you should be able to run one finger easily under each strap.
- 2. *Chest Band:*** The chest band should be level all the way around the trunk and it should stay in position when you lift your arms. The band should not prevent you from having a deep breath nor should you see excessive flesh bulging over the band.
- 3. *Cups:*** The breast should be fully contained within the cup – not spilling out over the top of the cup. Your breast should be lifted and slightly compressed against your chest – not hanging down and the cups should not be wrinkled. As a quick guide, your nipple height should be approximately halfway between your shoulder and your elbow.
- 4. *Under Wire:*** The underwire should sit on your rib cage not compress your breast tissue and the centrepiece of the bra should sit flat against your chest - there should be no gaps.
- 5. *Hooks:*** Ideally you should use the middle hook as this allows for adjustments if required.
- 6. *Fluctuation of Bra Size:*** This is a natural occurrence due to: growth during adolescence, weight changes, increased pectoral muscle size, different times during your menstrual cycle, during pregnancy and breastfeeding. It is a very good idea to check you bra size annually .
- 7. *Bra Size:*** Remember your bra size is only an *estimate*. Don't assume you are one size as this will vary from style to style and brand-to-brand – you must try on every bra and go through the checklist.

A Good Fitting Bra – The Posture Plus Bra Checklist

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1. <i>Shoulder Straps</i> | ✓ |
| 2. <i>Chest Band</i> | ✓ |
| 3. <i>Cups</i> | ✓ |
| 4. <i>Under Wire</i> | ✓ |
| 5. <i>Hooks</i> | ✓ |
| 6. <i>Fluctuation of Bra Size</i> | ✓ |
| 7. <i>Bra Size</i> | ✓ |

Sports Bra

A recent study of adolescent female athletes in Australia showed that their knowledge regarding sports bras: the fit and level of support, was poor. Every Mother should take her daughter to be fitted correctly – making sure that they learn how to spot the right/wrong bra for themselves. A significant number of women are also unaware of the potential for exercise-induced damage, stretching of the supporting structures, which can occur as a result of wearing the wrong bra during exercise.

The Posture Plus Sports Bra Checklist

- 1. Material:** The material should be stronger and slightly less elastic than an everyday bra. The fabric must breathe like any other piece of sports equipment
- 2. Seams:** Ensure that there are no seams that may cause skin friction with movement
- 3. Straps:** The shoulder straps should be slightly wider than an everyday bra and connected slightly closer to the centre of your back. This ensures plenty of freedom for movement around the shoulders
- 4. Chest Band:** The chest band should be slightly wider than a typical everyday bra and it should be made of sturdy material. When you slid off the shoulder straps it should be able to support most of your breast weight.
- 5. Cups:** The cups should support and contain most of your breast tissue
- 6. Running Test:** The sports bra “running test” is the best way you can test a bra for its “fitness”. In front of a mirror, lightly run on the spot while watching the vertical displacement of your nipples. They should not bounce up and down more than 5 cm. If they do, then you require a more supportive bra.

The Posture Plus Sports Bra Checklist

- 1. Material** ✓
- 2. Seams** ✓
- 3. Straps** ✓
- 4. Chest Band** ✓
- 5. Cups** ✓
- 6. Running Test** ✓

Scoliosis and Post Surgery

Women with more complicated spinal postures such as scoliosis – a s-shape in the spine, or post-surgery for e.g. in the case of a mastectomy should definitely have their bra professionally fitted and in some cases it may be helpful to individually modify the bra to accommodate the side to side differences in shoulder height, rib cage shape and breast size.

How to Help Improve Your Bra Posture – It's Simple!

Active Posture

Posture is not passive! You need to actively engage your muscles during the day to maintain your correct postural alignment. We spend too many hours sitting still at our desks, studying or working and generally slumping our bodies into bad positions. Follow the simple exercises below to help improve and maintain a better upper body posture.

Simple Stretch

Stretching the pectoral muscles:

Standing in a door way or a corner, place yourself in the surrender position and lightly lean forward - gently stretching open your chest (see Photo 3 &4)

Simple Stabilising

Open your collarbones and feel the shoulder blade bones at the back sliding down and in towards the hooks of your bra – like the letter “v”. At the same time imagine someone is gently pulling you up to the ceiling by your hair (see photo 5).

Take every opportunity to check your posture: in the mirrors in the gym when you are exercising, in the lift going to and from work and at home while you are cleaning your teeth.

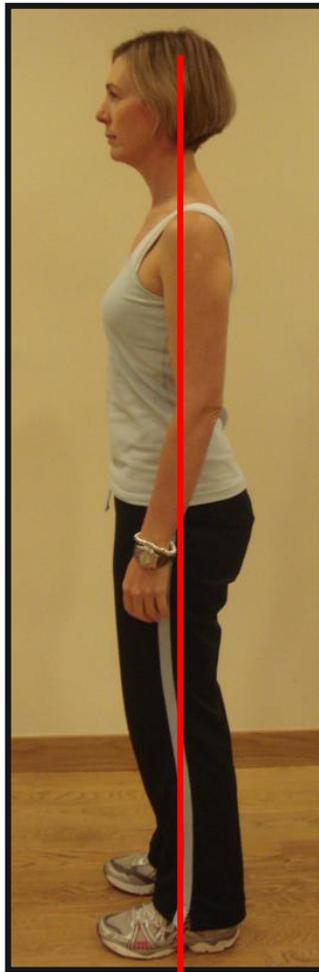
Simple Strengthening

Hold the correct posture, head up and shoulders lightly back, while you are carrying the groceries, heavy handbags and children. You end up getting a work out while you go about your everyday life activities and also prevent the strain going to your neck and shoulders.

The above exercises should not cause you any pain – if they do - **stop** immediately and seek help from your Physiotherapist.

The First Step

The first step is to go through all your bras at home and throw away the ones that don't pass the “fitness” test. And the next time you go bra shopping, make sure you use the Posture Plus Bra and Sports Bra checklist to help you find the best bra for you.



Ear

Shoulder

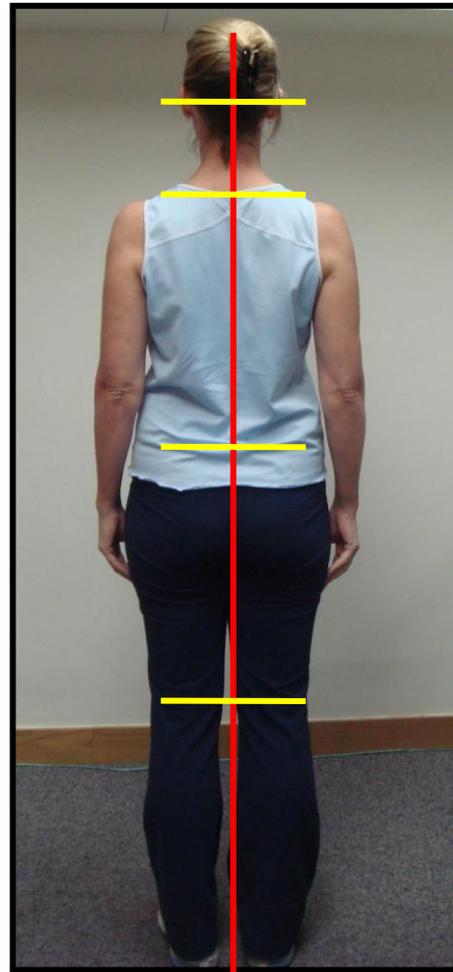
Trunk

Hip

Knee

Ankle

Photo 1
Ideal standing Posture
(Side View)



Ears

Shoulders

Pelvis

Knees

Photo 2
Ideal Standing Posture
(Back View)



Photo 3
Pectoralis Stretch

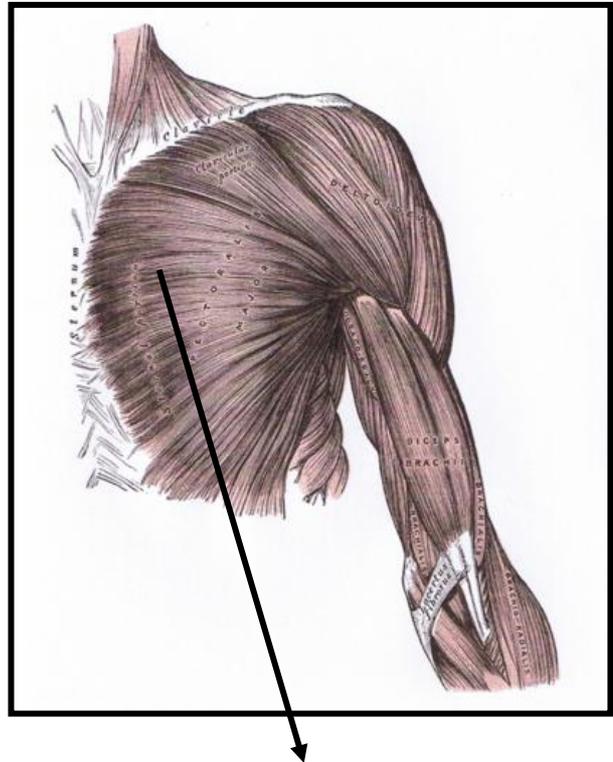


Photo 4
Pectoralis Major Muscle

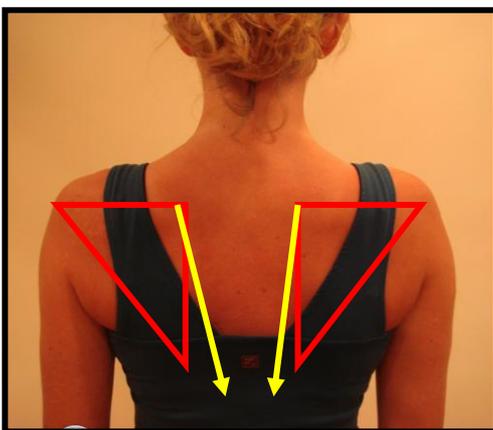


Photo 5
Strengthening: Open chest lightly and slide shoulder blades down your back