

AGEING WELL

FACTSHEETS

sia spinal
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association
FOR LIFE AFTER SPINAL CORD INJURY



POSTURE

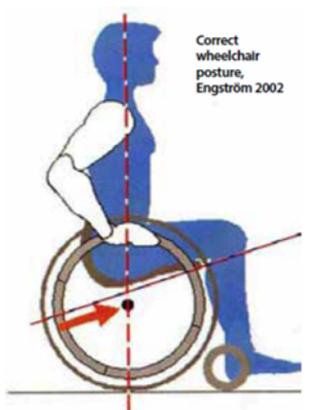
Posture

Posture is an area of health, which is sometimes not considered important until years of incorrect posture result in physical problems. Often the first time you become aware that your posture is deteriorating, is if someone close to you, or a health professional comments on the way you are sitting. Equally, you may catch sight of yourself in a mirror or window and be shocked by your reflection. Then you know it's time to act.

Sitting in a wheelchair over a long period shortens certain groups of muscles in the hips and legs and lack of trunk muscles causes slouching. Correct position of hips and legs is fundamental to being able to function at your optimum ability, do so safely and maintain independence.

What are the effects of incorrect posture?

- Pain in your back and upper limbs (headaches and neck pain may also occur)
- Fatigue
- Scoliosis or noticeable curvature of the upper spine
- Skin problems through uneven position in the chair – with risk of leading to pressure sores
- Respiratory problems – loss of muscle function causes body to slump forward
- Level of activity may fall leading to poor physical fitness
- Reduce your ability to propel a manual wheelchair
- Change in body shape causing more strain on neck and spine
- Loss of confidence / self-esteem
- Loss of balance which may impact on ability to transfer.



How to achieve a better posture:

- First priority is to realise your posture is deteriorating
- Look in the mirror and study how your posture has changed over the years. Your partner / carer may be the best person to recognise what changes have occurred. Ask for their honest opinion.

- Assessment by a Physiotherapist or Occupational Therapist who can help you select the correct equipment and sitting position for you.
- Check your cushion – does it need replacing / upgrading? Try before you buy, if possible.
- Chest belts help with stability.
- Consider lateral supports and / or a chair with a slightly higher back for added support. Using a corset may help with daily activities and sports by giving extra support. Also don't discard the armrests from your wheelchair too soon.
- Exercises to maintain flexibility. Stretching exercises are important too. See your Physio to make sure you are doing the correct exercises for you.
- Using a standing frame 3 times a week can help improve and maintain good posture.

What are the benefits of correct posture:

- Reduce levels of pain
- Improved appetite
- Less fatigue, more energy
- Lessen risk of pressure sores through even body weight distribution
- Increased confidence through better appearance – sitting up straight means you will get noticed
- Safer driving position
- Reduce the risk of developing abnormal spinal curvatures
- Helps maintain independence, optimises function, especially if you are able to propel yourself in your wheelchair.

Adopting the correct sitting position in your Wheelchair

- Make sure your ankles, the sides of your knees and your hip bones are not touching the wheelchair.
- Footplates should be at the correct height: there should be good contact between the thigh and the cushion throughout the whole length of the cushion.
- Check your posture by looking at yourself in a full-length mirror: shoulders should be level with your head in the middle, not tilted. Place hands on the top of your pelvis (the bony bit below the waist) and check that the right side is level with the left.
- Knees should be level and pointing forward: make sure that one knee is not higher than the other or in front of the other (imagine you have a tray on your lap with a glass of water – the tray should be level).
- Feet should be pointing forward.
- If you are able to lift both arms out to the side, check that the same amount of backrest is visible on each side; if not, it tells you that you are leaning to one side.
- Use postural supports appropriate for your level of injury.

“When I was first injured there was a lot said about posture. The physiotherapists were always saying ‘sit up straight’. While I was in the SCI Centre it was not a problem but soon after being left to my own devices I got into bad habits. I soon did away with armrests on my wheelchair. The trouble was being a T4 I did not have the stomach muscles to support myself all the time. I soon found myself slouching in my wheelchair leaning my arm on my leg. This was bad for posture but at the time it did not seem that way. It started to become habit forming. The trouble was I was always leaning on just one side. The result of this is years down the line I have developed scoliosis, so much so that when I bend sideways to pick something up I can only do this on my right side. Wanting to look ‘cool’ has been my downfall, not just in the way I sit because of a lack of arms on the wheelchair but also how I have sat when I get out of my wheelchair. In my early days after injury I transferred onto sofas that provided no support at all but they felt comfortable. I now have a recliner chair that is both comfortable and supportive. The trouble is we are tempted by what is comfortable and when it comes to wheelchairs looks play a huge part – they become an extension of our personalities. Bad posture comes over a prolonged period of time and sneaks up on us. Hindsight is a wonderful thing!” T4 Paraplegic

The environment you live in

- Make sure working areas such as the kitchen are ideal for you. If you use a computer, make sure you do not place the keyboard at a distance where you have to stretch out to reach it.
- Having to work in an asymmetrical posture for any length of time will eventually lead to asymmetrical posture whether it be at home, at work or in the garden!
- Regular contact with your therapy team is important. Your body may be changing and in response to any slight loss of movement, your equipment may need adapting or renewing.
- If you have experienced problems with your posture over many years but manage to make improvements, you may even be able to take up a new hobby or gentle sport and reclaim aspects of function that may have been lost due to the poor posture or pain arising from your posture.

'Hooking' the same arm behind the handle on the back of the wheelchair for support is a habit that tetraplegics often adopt but doing so can cause contractures and muscle imbalances.

'Tetra tum' occurs due to paralysed abdominal muscles. These muscles get over stretched by gravity. This stretching produces the characteristic 'tetra tum'. 'Tetra tum' occurs over different time spans in different people. So what can you do about it? Very little, apparently. Keeping your weight steady for your height and build is a good start. Keeping the best possible posture helps. Upper limbs exercises and passive exercises can help. A Physiotherapist can advise you on appropriate exercises. Spasms may help to keep the muscles toned, but not everyone has spasms they can benefit from.

Splints and Braces

Can be used to:

- Prevent or correct deformity
- Prevent joint stiffness
- Decrease pain

Measured for and fitted by the therapy team, who will devise an action plan for how long the device should be worn. The therapy team will also give guidance about extra precautions you should take to guard against pressure sores which could be caused by any rigid device.

Posture for Walkers

If you use devices, such as crutches to assist walking, be aware of any extra burden on wrist joints. Pain and a hard swelling may be a warning sign for undue strain. Shoulders can also be affected over time and pain will usually be an early sign of wear and tear. Any devices you use need maintaining in safe working order. Over time, devices may need replacing with something more appropriate for your changing requirements. It may compromise your safety to continue to use out of date equipment.

And finally

There is no shame in ageing, but it would be a shame not to respond to the effects of ageing. So equip yourself with the best advice and appropriate equipment to ensure you maximise your potential and enjoy your life as you age.

Disclaimer

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ABOUT SIA



The Spinal Injuries Association (SIA) is the leading national user-led charity for spinal cord injured (SCI) people. Being user led, we are well placed to understand the everyday needs of living with spinal cord injury and are here to meet those needs by providing key services to share information and experiences, and to campaign for change ensuring each person can lead a full and active life. We are here to support you from the moment your spinal cord injury happens, and for the rest of your life.

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