

Poor WFH set-ups and Covid stresses have caused a posture pandemic, with more of us experiencing neck and back pain than ever before. Here's how we can prevent lasting damage

Your good posture guide

THE EXPERT



CRAIG MCLEAN is the founder of Chiro London. He has 25 years' chiropractic experience.

As many of us have spent a large portion of this past year hunched over a laptop at our kitchen table, it's no wonder that we're going through a posture pandemic. During lockdown, Google searches for 'back pain' soared, while a survey of 2,000 UK adults by Nurofen found that one in three of us reported an increase in aches, with a quarter believing our home workspaces were to blame. Craig McLean, chiropractor and founder of Chiro London, believes that two factors were responsible. 'The combination of people working from home and feeling pretty stressed – both have the potential to create an abnormal amount of tension through the neck and shoulders.'

'If you're leaning forward over a laptop, the muscles at the back of your neck have to work overtime just to hold your head up,' says McLean. Meanwhile, worrying about the health, financial and social impacts of the pandemic might have caused us to tense up through our shoulders, contributing further to any posture issues. And while niggling pain might be a short-term symptom, a poor desk set-up can cause lasting damage over time. 'The muscles at the front can get quite weak,' says McLean. 'Over time, the bones in the upper back get thinner at the front and stay the same height at the back, which creates a hunch.' Luckily, there are some easy changes we can make to limit lasting damage.

BE DESK SAVVY

One easy thing you can do to stop yourself from hunching is raise your screen. 'In an ideal world, we'd all have a good office chair and a standing desk,' says McLean. But if you're short on space, a laptop stand

and a Bluetooth or plug-in keyboard should do the trick. 'That way, you can still type at table level, but the screen is at eye level, so you're not stooping down.' When you're setting up your desk, check that the top third of your screen is level with your eyes. If you're sitting on a chair, your legs should form a 90-degree angle from the seat, with your feet firmly planted on the floor and your lower back supported. Alternatively, swap your chair for an exercise ball. 'They're cheap and it's very difficult to slouch when you're sitting on one,' says McLean.

GET ON YOUR FEET

Sitting still for long periods of time can negatively impact our posture. 'In a normal working day, you might sit at your computer for an hour, then get up from your desk for a

"If you've got a Zoom call, put your laptop on a bookshelf and stand in front of it"

meeting,' says McLean. 'Now we're joining a 10 o'clock Zoom call, instead.' Longer walks to the loo and tea breaks punctuated by natters in the kitchen with colleagues also meant that when we did get up, it tended to be for longer, so McLean recommends standing up for calls. 'If you're on Zoom, put the laptop on your bookshelf and stand in front of that,' he says. Ironing boards and chests of drawers can also become makeshift standing desks. 'Or set a timer that goes off every 20-30 minutes, which will help remind you to walk about.'

PRIORITISE MOVEMENT

'Your daily routine should involve taking every joint in your body through its full range of motion – at least once,' says McLean, who says that desk workers often fail to do

this. 'Commonly, the base of the spine – the lower vertebrae – is stuck for people who sit all day. By the same token, the top part of the neck is wedged from craning forwards.' To combat this, tilt your head through six positions of movement: 'Left-to-right, side-to-side and forwards and backwards,' says McLean. 'Add it to your shower routine, while hot water is spraying on your neck.' Daily yoga or Pilates practise will also help you stay mobile. 'People get scared off by hour-long yoga routines, but there's no reason why you can't find time for a simple 20-minute sun salutation,' says McLean. And you can eventry working from the cobra position to help your posture. 'If you lay stomach-down on the floor with your laptop in front of you and prop yourself up on your elbows, that helps extend your neck and back in the opposite direction of the hunch – try it for 15 minutes.'

SLEEP SMART

You might not realise that the way you sleep could be damaging your posture, too. 'The worst thing you can do is sleep on your stomach, because then your neck is twisted to the side,' says McLean, who has a handy hack for anyone who wants to kick the habit. 'Tying a knot in the front of your T-shirt can help, as it makes being on your front uncomfortable.' Sleeping on your back or side is the best bet, but make sure that your neck is properly supported by a pillow – if you're experiencing neck ache, McLean recommends trying a contoured one. 'It has a little ridge in it, which supports your neck in a better position.' You might also find it comfortable to sleep with a pillow between your knees to reduce the stress on your hips and lower back. 'This can be particularly helpful for pregnant women.' 6

Words Niamh Leonard-Bedwell. Photograph Stocksy