



Craig Hospital

Redefining Possible for People with Spinal Cord and Brain Injuries

Provided as a courtesy of
Craig Hospital
3425 South Clarkson St.
Englewood, Colorado 80113

www.craighospital.org

For more information:

Craig Hospital Nurse Advice Line

1-800-247-0257

Posture

You may find it harder to sit up straight at the table. You may notice a certain crookedness when glancing in a mirror or store window. The lower back pain or forward lean seems to have gotten worse over the past year. Or your back just seems constantly tired. These symptoms all point to posture problems, which are common with both aging and SCI. Getting older with SCI? Pay attention...

The Problems...

Many posture problems are associated with SCI, ranging from chronic pain and fatigue to scoliosis and kyphosis, as well as skin and respiratory problems. Just like the problems, the causes are numerous:

- Lack of trunk muscles puts the body in a constant slump
- Muscle imbalance, gravity, or spasticity pulls us to one side or the other
- Inactivity or lack of exercising drastically decreases physical fitness, leaving us fatigued or in chronic pain
- Habitual functional activities done the same way every day, such as hooking the same arm on the chair back for support, can cause contractures and severe muscle imbalances
- Poorly fitted equipment – wheelchair, cushion, or back – places the body in a poor position

The content in this document is intended for general informational purposes only and is not a substitute for professional medical advice or treatment for specific medical conditions. No professional relationship is implied or otherwise established by reading this document. You should not use this information to diagnose or treat a health problem or disease without consulting with a qualified healthcare provider. Many of the resources referenced are not affiliated with Craig Hospital. Craig Hospital assumes no liability for any third party material or for any action or inaction taken as a result of any content or any suggestions made in this document and should not be relied upon without independent investigation. The information on this page is a public service provided by Craig Hospital and in no way represents a recommendation or endorsement by Craig Hospital.

When left un-addressed, the problems magnify, possibly causing worse problems. Sitting crooked means uneven weight distribution and possible skin sores. Slumping or slouching makes the lungs work harder, compromising respiratory function. Poor posture while sitting or wheeling puts extra strain on the neck and spine, causing pain and discomfort. The more slumping or leaning or slouching, in *response* to pain, the more pain or fatigue that is *produced*.

Evaluation:

Determining whether you've got a problem may be as easy as asking, and honestly answering, a few questions:

- Do you have chronic pain in the neck, lower back or trunk?
- Is your fatigue more in the trunk and back, rather than in your arms or shoulders?
- Do you sit crooked? Are you leaning to one side or the other? Is one hip higher than the other? Is one hip or knee more forward than the other?
- Are you always leaning a bit forward or is balance a problem?
- Do you have breathing problems or trouble getting full breaths?

Thinking about these questions is a good **first step**. Answering yes to any means you may need to go further.

Looking at how you're sitting is a good **second step**. Get someone to help. When facing a mirror, is more of the chair back visible on one side or the other? When viewing a profile, does your ear lobe, shoulder joint, and hip joint form a straight vertical line above the chair axle?

Remember: living in our bodies day to day makes it difficult to always recognize small changes which can result in big problems. You may need to make a conscious effort to observe and evaluate how you sit.

The **third step** is seeking the opinion and evaluation of a physical or occupational therapist or physician trained in spinal cord injury.

Getting Straight:

Changes in the body often require new or different equipment. "Gravity is not your friend," says Craig Hospital physical therapist Cindy Smith. Lack of trunk muscles, or just minor trunk muscle imbalances can, over the course of years, cause major problems with posture. Smith compares the spine to building blocks. Stack them slightly off kilter and they'll probably be okay. Put some weight on them and problems develop over time.

Posture

Eventually, gravity takes its toll and the price is poor posture, chronic pain, decreased energy, and skin problems. We can address the problems in a number of ways – what we sit in, what we sit on, and possibly even the types of weight shifts we do.

Starting at the bottom and working up, many solutions exist to address posture problems:

- New or modified cushions can ensure proper weight distribution and begin to solve hip unevenness.
- Solid chair backs can provide the support necessary to compensate for weakness in the trunk.
- Lateral supports, or "wings," will serve to support the trunk and keep it straight.
- Chest belts can ensure stability and help with balance.
- Corsets can counter act muscle imbalances, straighten out the trunk, reduce fatigue, and assist with balance.

One, several, or all of these solutions can be used to deal with poor posture.

The Payoffs:

There are rewards for making these changes: reduced fatigue and thus more energy, decreased pain, fewer skin problems, reduction of spinal curvature or slanting hips and, in general, an overall better and more “normal” appearance.

Wearing a corset may provide the trunk stability necessary to make sports or other activities fun rather than work. Lateral supports and a chest belt may reduce pain and fatigue enough to make sitting at a desk for hours feasible and thus make employment possible. Proper posture leads to even weight distribution, fewer potential skin problems, and safer driving. Proper posture affects our body physics and places us in a more efficient wheeling position.

And not all the effects are physical. Posture is often a reflection of how we feel about ourselves. Sitting up straight speaks forcefully to others about our confidence, competence, and self-image in general. Height, whether sitting or standing, is related to self-esteem.

Everyone ages, and as they do their bodies change. Responding to these changes with appropriate equipment can allow us to avoid future problems and enjoy ourselves as we age.

This brochure was prepared with funding from the U.S. Department of Education's National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research. The opinions contained in this publication are those of the grantee and do not necessarily reflect those of the US Department of Education.