

# Back pain management programme

## Posture in activities of daily living

As we have learnt, poor posture can cause strain on your back and lead to pain. Sitting and standing up straight may initially seem a little strange or even un-natural. This is because we tend to slouch when relaxing, and poor posture can become habitual and feel natural. If you think about how you use your back in everyday life, you learn better habits which can help your back pain.

It is important to have a good back and neck posture when doing everyday activities. Keeping a good posture and maintaining the natural curves in your back and neck will enable you to carry on with daily life putting less stress on your back. The aim is to help you take control of your body and carry out normal activities.

**Here are some common difficulties and solutions to help with posture in everyday activities:**

### Kitchen

- **Washing up.** Place a second bowl upside down under the top one if the sink is too deep or too low **or** stand the bowl on the draining board. Stand close to the sink to avoid stooping. Open the cupboard door underneath the sink and put a foot up on the bottom of the cupboard to help ease back strain and get closer to the washing up. The bottom of the bowl should be at wrist level so that you can put the palms of your hand in the bottom of bowl
- **Filling and lifting kettle.** Take jugs of water to the kettle to fill.
- **Lifting full pots and pans.** Use a vegetable basket inside the pan when cooking so that the vegetables can be lifted out, hence removing some of the weight and making the pan easier to lift
- **Work surfaces.** These should be high enough to avoid bending over. If the surface can't be raised, sit down.
- **Storage.** Keep items that are often used such as food, pots and pans within easy reach at waist height.
- Sit on a high stool when cooking, preparing food or washing up.
- Use your feet to close low drawers and cupboards.
- Never twist and bend at the same time. Always bend your knees, not your back when using an oven or the fridge/freezer.
- **Cooker.** If your cooker is low, make sure you bend your knees and hips, not your back.
- **Washing machine.** Kneel on a cushion to take the washing out of the machine. Put a low chair or stool beside the machine as a point of transfer. When hanging the washing out, keep a chair by the line to rest the basket on and pegs close to hand to avoid repetitive movements. Don't carry a laundry basket full of clothes.

## Lounge

- **Ironing.** Pace it (10 minutes a day). Ironing surfaces should be high enough to avoid stooping. However, don't be too high - having the arms continually raised imposes strain on the shoulder, neck and upper back.
  - Stand as close to the ironing board as possible with one foot slightly forward or raised on a small box.
  - Use your bodyweight and sway from one foot to the other as you move the iron sideways over the garment.
  - Keep clothes on a stool at the side of the ironing board to save bending.
  - Use a high stool to perch or sit down for at least some of the time. Change your position from sitting to standing.
  - Use a steam iron if possible as this requires less pressure.
  - Stand at an angle as this keeps your back straighter.
  - Avoid twisting.
  - If possible, keep the ironing board up to save the effort of putting it up and down.
- **Hoovering.** Pace it (one room a day).
  - Upright hoovers tend to be heavier to use and can cause you to twist.
  - Cylinder hoovers are usually lighter to use and you can buy an extension pole to make the handle longer. You can also do some of the hovering on your knees.
  - Use the power of your legs and walk with the Hoover. Move the whole body forwards and backwards with the sweeping action. Don't stoop, keep your back straight and avoid twisting movements.
  - Consider a carpet sweeper. They are often light and easy to use. Some people keep one upstairs to avoid carrying the Hoover up and down the stairs.
  - Use long handled equipment such as a mop for cleaning the floor.
- **Polishing/dusting.** Pace it (one room a day)  
Use a feather duster to minimise reaching.  
Do not stretch to high things, climb on a stool or chair

## Bedroom

- **Bed making.** Do not bend or stretch over your bed, make the bed on your knees instead.
  - Consider using fitted sheets that are easier to use and involve less bending and lifting.
  - Feed the duvet cover into the corners. Make sure you can get round both sides of the bed.

- **Dressing.** Early morning joint stiffness is a common problem for people with chronic pain.
  - Have a bath or shower first to ease the stiffness.
  - Always bring your leg/foot up towards you to avoid bending forward.
  - When dressing your lower half place your painful/stiff leg in first.
  - When undressing take your painful/stiff leg out first.
  - Sit in a chair to dress.
  - Do not bend forward when you put your shoes/socks on. Bring your foot up towards you and rest on a small stool, table or chair or across your other leg.
- **Getting out of bed.** Roll onto your side, push up to a sitting position with your arms as your legs descend to the floor.
- **Sex.** See the separate handout in your pack.

## Bathroom

- **Shaving** (men). Do not stoop or bend forward; sit on a stool or toilet.
- **Cleaning teeth.** Sit on the toilet or a stool close to the sink.
- **Bathing.** Sitting in the bath with your legs out straight is not recommended because it can make your back and leg pain worse. Try sitting with your legs slightly bent or kneel in the bath.  
Try letting the water out before getting out.  
Move from sitting in the bath to kneeling and then get out.
- **Showering.** Use a stool or chair if you have difficulty standing.
- **Washing hair.** Your back should be straight in the bath and use a jug or hand held shower head or shower. Don't stand and bend over the sink or bath because this increases back pain and strain.  
Have one foot up on the side of the bath and lean onto your knee and use a shower head.
- **Cleaning the bath.** Kneel at an angle to the bath and use a long handled sponge to minimise bending.

## Shopping

- **Pace.** Do several small trips.
- Always remember to lift, bend and carry correctly.
- Do not carry all the weight in one hand; distribute the weight evenly between two bags whatever you are carrying.
- If you have a neck problem consider a rucksack.
- A shopping trolley may be useful but can be difficult to get up and down curves, in/out of cars and buses.
- Try to use supermarket trolleys that have the base at a higher level as this will help you to avoid bending.

## Looking after children

- While dressing/undressing your child, stand them on a chair or bed to avoid stooping.
- Kneel while washing your child in the bath.
- Let them climb out of the bath onto a chair to be dried.
- Wash, change and dress your baby on a table with everything close by.
- Bend your knees rather than your back to lift your child.

## Driving

- Pace. Try and stop on long journeys to change your position.
- Make sure your back is well supported and you are sitting upright and straight.

## Gardening

- Long handled tools are available.
- Avoid digging in most cases.
- Mowing. An electric lawn mower is the lightest and avoids bending.

## Hints to help with posture in daily tasks

- Get close to the task or object.
- Use long handled equipment.
- Avoid extreme of range in bending, twisting and reaching.
- If the surfaces are too low, raise or if too high, can you be raised?
- Avoid repetitive movements such as twisting when ironing.
- Bend by using your legs not your back.
- Sitting on a chair may help when reaching low items while you build up your leg muscles.
- Can you arrange your environment to encourage good posture?
- Put heavier objects used more frequently at an easily accessible height.
- Only work at improving your posture in a couple of tasks at a time. Try putting a sticker on the object to help you remember your posture.
- Pace yourself; think little and often.
- Can you change the equipment you are using to make it easier?
- If an activity is still difficult to do, think about changing the way that you usually do it.
- Adjust yourself to your environment.
- Avoid twisting/bending: these are the worst movements as they can rotate discs.
- The key central points are the pelvis and hips.
- Can't change your posture too quickly.
- Avoid extremes of range such as bending, reaching and repetition. Remember to step round rather than bend/twist.
- Think about the task first rather than doing it automatically.