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The Hazards of Forward Head Posture

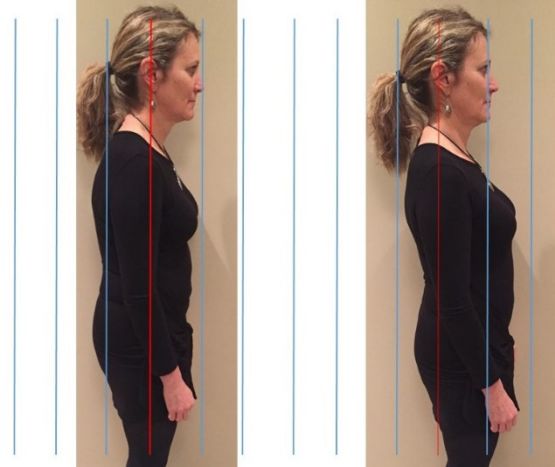
People who sit in front of a computer all day or who lead sedentary lives are at increased risk of developing forward head posture (FHP), one of today's greatest postural concerns.



Many people think they have “bad posture” when working at the computer, that they relate to either sitting hunched forward in their chair or reaching forward; both of these cause a rounded upper back and a forward head position.

What is FHP?

As the name suggests, in FHP the head juts out in front of the shoulders, rather than sitting directly above the shoulders and spinal column. In FHP, the centre of gravity of the head shifts from resting over the vertebrae to being over the facet joints and contributes to upper back and neck muscle tightness. The head shift causes a narrowing of the foramen (hole) where the nerves feed off the spinal cord and can contribute to compression of the nerves running down the arm. This can result in numbness and tingling in the arm. There are varying degrees of FHP.



Poor Posture (FHP)

Normal Posture

Why does FHP Happen?

The following are some of the factors that medical experts believe cause or contribute to FHP:

- Straining to see the computer screen;
- Bending forward to read documents flat on the desk or to view the monitor;
- Perching on the chair (often due to it being too high);
- Repetitive reaching forward to type and mouse on a desk that's too high;
- Driving with the head forward and unsupported;
- Poor postural habits;
- Tight chest muscles that pull the head forward;
- Weakness in the upper back muscles;
- Degenerative diseases such as osteoarthritis;
- Trauma to the neck or spinal column;
- Sleeping on the back with a pillow that's too large;
- Airway breathing problems;
- Hyper-pronation of the foot.

Related Health Problems

FHP is caused by a weakening of the upper back muscles and pectoral muscles that are too tight. FHP can contribute to the following health issues:

- Neck and upper back pain;
- Pain or numbness down the arm(s);
- Fatigue;
- Headaches;
- Decreased lung capacity;
- Decreased range of motion in the shoulder;
- Altered balance and mobility.

Conduct a Self-Test for FHP

1. Position your heels a maximum of 6" from an obstructed wall.
2. Stand so your buttocks, back and head touch the wall.

Is it difficult for you to stand like this? Can your head easily touch the wall or do you have to force it back? If you force it back, are you extending your neck backwards to do so? If you answered YES, you may have FHP.

What can you do if you think you have FHP?

1. Arrange for an ergonomic assessment by a Certified Professional Ergonomist. Little things like adjusting your chair to better support your back, ensuring you have good lumbar support in your chair and bringing your monitor closer to you can improve your posture immediately.
2. Relearn sitting, standing and sleeping postural habits. Try to keep your head, neck and spine in normal alignment as much as possible. You'll need to keep reminding yourself until good posture becomes a habit.
3. Take breaks throughout the day. Alternating between sitting and standing and

4. Establish a regular exercise program that includes exercises to strengthen the weakened, stretched muscles of the neck and upper back that are responsible for pulling the head backward. Perform stretches to relax the tight, shortened chest (pectoral) muscles which, when tight, pull the head forward.
5. If concerned, ask your doctor to refer you for a complete postural examination.

One excellent stretch is the Pectoral Stretch. These chest muscles are commonly tight in people with FHP.



Anderson Ergonomics Consulting has put together a sheet of office stretches and industrial stretches that can help you. <http://anderson-ergo.ca/products/>. These are provided during all of our training and assessment sessions.

Anderson Ergonomics Consulting has a lunch and learn style seminar called "Dynamic Strengthening and Stretching for your postural muscles" that is an educational, fun and interactive seminar designed to teach awareness of what causes poor posture and what people can do to prevent it. Contact us for more details.

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