

INNER CIRCLE INSIGHTS

Body Balance and Pain

So how can someone who sits up straight all the time start having back pain without any apparent cause of injury, like a work injury or auto accident? The answer lies in a better understanding of posture and “body balance”. This means looking at how the person is balanced, or how symmetric they are, from head to toe. Is the person’s head tilted or turned one way or is it too far forward from the rest of the body? Are the shoulders uneven? Is the trunk turned one way or tilted? Are the hips uneven? How are the legs positioned; is one foot turned out a little more than the other? These questions must be answered when trying to figure out why someone is experiencing pain, regardless of where the pain is located. If someone has one or more of these “imbalances” they don’t have “good posture”, even if they do sit up straight.

While most people are familiar with the phrase, “good posture”, few know what it means, beyond “sitting up straight and not slouching”. We are often told “bad posture” can lead to harmful effects on the spine, many of which may not occur until later in life. Those with “good posture”, on the other hand, will be less likely to have back problems later in life. Given this understanding of posture, many people may wrongly assume they have pain because they don’t sit up straight, while others may assume they are pain-free because they do. The problem with this simple understanding is that “slouchers” don’t always develop back problems and “non-slouchers” often do. Essentially bad posture alone does not cause “pain” but lack of balance does.

When someone is unbalanced, some muscles and areas of soft tissue are shortened. In fact, these shortened structures are probably the cause of the imbalances in the first place. For instance, if the muscles or soft tissue between the head and left shoulder are shortened the head will be tilted to the left and the left shoulder will be higher than the right. When muscles are shortened for long periods of time they become extremely tight as does the soft tissue, or fascia, surrounding the muscles. When this happens, movement is limited by the restrictions of the soft tissue and/or muscles. If present long enough, the person may develop visibly “bad posture” in the area of tightness but will also develop decreased Range of Motion and functional abilities as well as increased pain. When this happens your box just got smaller leading to less quality of life.

Additionally, affecting areas in one part of the body can have a significant effect on other areas. This is because many muscles in the body extend to more than one body area. Some muscles extend from the low back area to the base of the skull. Others run from the pelvic region past the knee. Surrounding and supporting these muscles is connective tissue, or fascia, which can have connections to other body parts or regions. It’s easy to see, then, that if a particular muscle or area of fascia is tight, other parts of the body will be affected. This sets up a situation where the body tries to adapt by shifting slightly, or compensating, to counteract the effect of the restrictions. This is done so we can get through our normal activities without feeling the tightness or pain produced by the shortened muscles or fascia. Unfortunately, this compensation causes other muscles to become shortened, thus causing more imbalances, more pain and less quality of life.

This strategy of the body may work for a while; we can get through our day with an occasional “twinge” or “spasm”, but no real pain is experienced. At some point, however, the body will say, “Enough is enough. I can’t compensate anymore.” Now, no matter how we try to shift our body, the pain or tightness is still there. Hot packs don’t seem to work as well as they used to. Medications are less effective; we do fewer activities; we stop doing the things we love until we can’t compensate anymore and seek medical attention.

When trying to correct a situation like this, it’s important to look at what specific areas or muscles are actually tight. Rarely will the same muscles be equally tight on both sides of the body, because of the muscle imbalances previously discussed. An exercise program should be developed to address specific muscles; some will need to be stretched, others strengthened. Using manual physical therapy techniques, such as myofascial release, can assist in loosening the fascia or soft tissue restrictions. A balanced treatment program of hands-on therapy and exercise is the best way to achieve a balanced body and eliminate pain.

At Inner Circle we always provide the best in hands on manual therapy in an attempt to change the restrictions that cause imbalances but we have also developed a 4-stage exercise program that is individual specific in order to strengthen what is weak and stretch what is tight. This program combination will provide you the change in your body you’ve been searching for but only if you give it the effort “nothing in life worth anything was easy”. Those aches and pains aren’t going away by themselves, start taking time for yourself to regain the function and lifestyle you once had.

Professionally yours,

Timothy M. Alloway, MSPT