

Postural Retraining

By Phillip Bazzini, CSCS

Good posture gives off a confident and healthy appearance. It tells the world you probably (and properly) lift weights, and says I'm comfortable with my physique. However, with all the driving, reading, and computer work necessary in our lives, we are all at risk for a condition known as upper cross syndrome (UCS). This is what therapists call what we know as rounded shoulders.

Causes

UCS is identified by Michele Moore, DC and Vladimir Janda, MD as weakened upper back muscles (middle and lower trapezius, serratus, and scalenes), and overly tight chest and certain neck muscles (levator scapula, pectoralis major, and upper trapezius).

It is my long time belief that the cause of UCS can be more than just someone having weak or tight muscles. There are people who just frequently stand and sit slouched. I call this cause of poor posture habitual slouching (HS). They may not be doing tons of bench pressing (a UCS risk factor) or little to no back exercise (another UCS risk factor). The HS group may not sit at a desk all day (another risk factor) performing data entry but have slouched posture simply out of habit.

Another cause for rounded posture is structural. This unfortunately is extremely difficult to correct. These individuals typically have a degenerative collapsing of the front bones of the upper spine, possibly thoracic osteoporosis.

Sometimes in the best of intended fitness programs, the posture muscles are neglected. For example, what exercises are included in group exercise classes to strengthen the back? Equipment is needed to perform rows, scarecrows, and reverse flies making it difficult (but not impossible) for group classes to strengthen the posture muscles.

Although great aerobic exercises, the Concept 2 Rower, biking and Spinning promote slouched posture. No problem, but remember to perform the posture program to counter the effects of the prolonged rounded positions. .

Also, when performing the cable, dumbbell, machine, elastic cord, or barbell row exercise, avoid leaning forward in a slouched position to gain momentum to pull the weight towards you. This is not only dangerous over time (risk of an eventual herniated disk), but defeats the purpose of the row exercise which is to strengthen the back. If improved use of pulling momentum is the goal, then properly executed power exercises such as the clean might be something to consider. The best row form has the upper shoulders low, chest protruded and most importantly, shoulder blades pulled together (think extreme military posture).

Exercise Posture

The muscles that extend, externally rotate, retract, and depress your shoulder blades (scapula) are the ones NOT to neglect in a well designed program. The following exercises address the aforementioned muscles and movements: rows, scarecrow, camel stretch, reverse fly, incline bench prone letter Y raises, and bent over lateral raises. Also, consider supplementing your bench pressing with the push ups plus to help work your serratus. Lorenzo Gonzalez, DPT, recommends limiting the lat pulldown exercise because of the latissimus attachment on the inside of the upper arm. He theorizes that overdoing it with lat pulldowns will rotate the arms

inward and the shoulders to round forward. Gonzalez recommends performing the row exercise instead to help rotate the arms outward.

Think Posture

Dr. Moshe Feldenkrais noted that the root of the word *posture* is *post*, which describes something rigid. He instead coined the term **acture** to suggest that the spine dynamically moves and adjusts with every *action*. Influenced by Feldenkrais's thinking that the spine should not be rigid, I am suggesting **postural awareness**. Think about your posture when lifting, walking, running, climbing, sitting, standing, or preparing for sleep. When sitting are your feet positioned to help your spine sit straight or slouched? Do you use a McKenzie lumbar support pillow? Are your shoulders slightly pulled back when you are standing? Is your torso positioned forward, back, sideways, or neutral when running?

Posture Program

- Upper body pull vs. push exercise ratio should be at least 1:1, even 3:2 is ok
- Exercise scapular retraction with rows more than with lat pulldown 2-3x a week
- Perform external rotation exercise with light dumbbells or cables 3x a week
- Actively stretch the chest, internal rotators and front shoulders everyday
- Learn how to perform cervical retraction
- Use a lumbar support pillow when sitting
- Most importantly, Think Posture. Ask yourself, "Is my current posture slouched or neutral?"
- Consider before and after photos to track postural retraining effectiveness

All it takes is a little awareness of your posture to help address the positions we put ourselves in every day.

Although this program should be safe for most people, some exercises are not universal, such as the bent over row. It is always best to be prequalified by a physician, therapist, or trainer before undergoing an exercise program.

Further information can be found in Robin McKenzie's excellent book "Treat your Own Back," and "Treat Your Own Neck."

If you are interested in learning more about this type of training,
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