

# Stand Tall with **Pilates**

By Beth Downey

A common goal for Pilates' clients is the attainment of good posture. Not only does good posture exude self-confidence and grace but also it is essential to a healthy, well-functioning body. Good posture helps to achieve maximum flexibility, strength and movement throughout the whole body while projecting a graceful and powerful personal style.



At Body Precision Pilates Studio, clients come to us at all ages and with all different body types. Many of us walk around with a degree of pain in one part of our body or another, often induced by poor postural alignment. Correcting poor postural habits should begin as early as possible. Joseph Pilates said, "In childhood, both good and bad habits are easily formed. Why not then concentrate on the formation of only good habits and thus avoid the necessity later on in life in attempting to correct bad habits." Since many of us grew to adulthood unaware of the forces playing upon our body, we seek out Pilates to target the specific deep and supporting muscles needed to retain good posture. Pilates serves as an excellent vehicle for postural restructuring because postural awareness is part of every Pilate's exercise.

## POSTURE FOR HEALTH

Good posture will help attain a healthier, better functioning body. Poor posture causes undue stress on the joints and the musculature that supports them. If your body is incorrectly balanced, the body will compensate for the imbalance by working counter muscles more and over time will lead to pain. Strengthening the muscles while the body is properly aligned reduces stress on the spine and pelvis and builds a powerful structure to move, stand and sit throughout the busy day.

As important as strength, a healthy spine needs mobility. Joe Pilates wrote in his book "Return to Life", "The art of [Pilates] proves that the only real guide to your true age lies not in years but as you actually are as infallibly indicated by the degree of natural and normal flexibility enjoyed by your spine throughout life. If your spine is inflexibly stiff at thirty, you are old; if it is completely flexible at sixty, you are young." Pilates' exercises squarely address flexibility requirements by lengthening the tighter more contracted muscles. Balancing strength and flexibility creates a graceful and more powerful body.

When you stand erect and strong, your lengthened framework helps keep your internal organs in line for proper functioning. Lazy posture causes a collapse in the structural system, which can exacerbate physical ailments such as poor circulation, digestive problems, upper and lower back pain, headaches and shortness of breath. Good posture allows your lungs to expand fully and directly contributes to good breathing and circulation. A strong, well-aligned body moves with less effort and keeps muscles flexible, responsive and stable.

## WHAT IS CORRECT POSTURE?

Our spine is composed of natural curves, which allow shock absorption and range of motion. If the spine's curvature is too great or too little or if one side of the body is lifted or forward more than the other side, poor posture will result.

To picture an ideal posture, draw a plumb line through the body from the side. Starting at the ear lobe, the line would then fall through the center of the shoulder, hip joint, ankle joint, and finish just in front of the heel (see picture). From the front view the line would fall through the center of the skull, through the center of the spine and hips. The shoulders, pelvis and knees would be equally balanced on either side, with equal weight landing on the feet.

Since the feet are the base of support for your entire structure, the weight needs to be evenly distributed throughout the three points that form a triangle on the feet: 1) the ball of the big toe 2) the ball of the the little toe 3) the center of the heel. Most of us tend to put more weight on the inside of the foot (pronation) or the outside (supination). This uneven distribution can have an adverse effect on our whole building: the knees, hips and pelvis, in turn creating muscular imbalances that affect our posture.

## YOUR PERSONAL POSTURAL ASSESSMENT

Stand in front of a mirror in your natural position. Assess your posture beginning with the feet.

### Feet

1. Is one foot more forward or turned out than the other?
2. Do your feet supinate or pronate?
3. Do your feet turn out or in?

### Knees

1. Do both knees track evenly over the center of your feet?
2. Do your knees turn in or out?
3. Does one knee rotate more than the other?
4. Do you hyperextend your knees?

### Hips

1. Does one hip sit higher than the other?
2. Does one hip turn in more than the other?

### Shoulder/Arms

1. Is one shoulder higher than the other?
2. Do the shoulders curl forward?
3. Do your arms hang in front or at your sides?

## NOW TURN TO THE SIDE AND CHECK THE MIRROR.

1. Check your plumb line from ears to shoulders to hips to ankles and how much you deviate.
2. Check your spinal curves, both upper back and lower back to see if over exaggerated.
3. Check your head placement, forward or back.
4. Do your arms fall forward or straight down from shoulders?
5. Do your knees lock?

Make note of your postural imbalances and the changes needed to bring your body closer to ideal posture. The body learns what you teach it. The body moves in "patterns of motion" adopted by each individual's inherent body type, history of injuries and daily habits. Practice makes permanent so as we can continue poor habits, so continues poor patterning. You can "break the habit" by teaching your body new patterns. "Good posture can be successfully acquired only when the entire mechanism of the body is under perfect control. Graceful carriage follows as a matter of course," according to Joseph Pilates.



## PILATES AND POSTURE

Pilates works on the patterning of the body to balance the asymmetrical muscle development inherent in poor posture. Pilate's exercises encourage bilateral development by strengthening the weaker more stretched muscles and lengthening the strong, overdeveloped muscles. Every exercise in Pilates focuses on correct alignment and working from the inside out. The core work affects not only the deep abdominal muscles but also the spinal extensors that directly wrap around the spinal vertebra. Both need to be strong and active for the good posture.

A common postural deviation is when the upper back slumps forward bringing along the head and shoulders. This rounded or kyphotic position is common with the elderly as gravity takes its toll over the years. Also, people of all ages from adolescents on are spending more time on the computer contributing to this posture. This postural pattern is often accompanied by back and neck pain or strain. Pilates counter balances this position by opening up the chest and shoulders, strengthening the deep upper back muscles and abdominals, gradually bringing the spine into a taller and longer position. The shoulders and head begin to sit atop the spine more naturally, causing back and neck pain to subside.

Side spinal curvature (or scoliosis) is another common postural deviation that creates back pain due to side imbalances in the hip or pelvis as well as leg length. Again, Pilates can target the muscles that need to be strengthened with the others that need lengthening to reduce compression and inflammation. Many of the one-sided or unilateral Pilates' exercises help with scoliosis realignment.

Many Pilate's practitioners report that Pilates helps them feel longer and slimmer and have actually grown taller by 1/8-1/2 inch. Tightening up your abs and lifting your spine out from your hips can achieve the long, toned look that comes with a beautiful posture.



*Beth Downey is the owner of Body Precision Pilates Studio in Rosemont, PA and the director of the nationally recognized Body Precision Teacher Certification Program for Traditional Pilates. Beth has been teaching Pilates for over 10 years and specializes in working with clients with back and neck issues. Body Precision is an educational member of the Pilates Method Alliance. You can reach Beth at [BethDowney@phillyfitmagazine.com](mailto:BethDowney@phillyfitmagazine.com)*