

Beauty



After years of back pain from high heels and cubicle life, Ning Chao finally straightens herself out

TALL ORDER

I KNOW THAT GOOD posture is supposed to make you look taller, slimmer, and more confident, but my signature slouch has always felt so natural. Add on my 21st-century superwoman gear (heels and heavy bags), and the hunching just gets worse. Then one day I rise from my desk with an alarming ache in my lower back. Am I turning into a cripple? It's time to get help.

According to the American Chiropractic Association, we spend more than \$50 billion on back-pain treatments every year. The American Pain Foundation ranks it the number-one cause of disability for people under 45. Many cases are injury- or genetics-related, but stress, fatigue, and poor posture can also cause spasms, says orthopedic surgeon Dr. Richard D. Guyer, cofounder of the Texas Back Institute. "Posture affects the spine's alignment. If you're not standing up straight, you'll put more strain on the discs, joints, muscles, and ligaments that support the spine." And stilettos don't help, either, no matter how good they look. "Wearing

heels rotates the pelvis and causes stress on the lower back," explains Guyer. Sorry, Manolo.

Hoping for an instant cure, I get a Posture Pro V scan at Equinox gym's exclusive E club in Manhattan. According to the program, my right shoulder and left hip are higher, and my shoulders are so rounded that my hands hang in front of my thighs instead of at my side. In profile, I'm curved like a question mark. Click on the "effects of time" option, and my skeletal avatar is frozen mid-merengue step. Somehow, I'm not surprised: This is my father's body.

Generations of Chao family evolution have resulted in my lean, long-torso build, but I've always been stubbornly slumped and inactive. For as long as I can remember, my mother has been pulling my shoulders back and commanding me to stand straighter.

"You're tall and you come from a culture that might not value that," says Alison West, founder of the Yoga Union Center for Backcare & Scoliosis, when she assesses me during her class at Pure Yoga in NYC. "Don't be afraid >>

to be tall." At 5'9", I've always wanted to be two inches shorter, closer in height to my many petite friends who daintily hover just above 5 feet. And naturally, the more my mom nagged, the more I hunched. But when my doctor prescribes physical therapy (aka mandatory exercise) for my sore back, I know it's time to grow up.

AT MY FIRST appointment, Sports Physical Therapy of New York therapist Robert Cheng is shocked: "You have the hamstrings of an 80-year-old!" he says, then diagnoses me with muscular strain from poor posture and lack of exercise. Unable to touch my toes, I feel geriatric, but he assures me that back pain often starts around age 30 (I'm only 29!) or earlier, here in the Information Age. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, desk jobs rank in the top five for occupations with the most back injuries. It's more difficult to maintain good posture while sitting than standing, and compared with lying down, sitting causes three times more pressure on the discs that support each vertebra.

Cheng choreographs a series of stretches and strengthening exercises for me to repeat at every session. The appointments force me into a regular fitness regimen (accompanied by insurance-covered massages that are the real incentive), but once my referrals run out, the impetus to stay active is all on me. Since I tend to slump at my desk for hours, Cheng suggests that I get up and walk around whenever I start to fidget. West recommends hooking my arms behind the back of my chair to open up my shoulders while I'm sitting reading e-mails. The problem is that I forget to do the exercises. I Google "posture helpers" and buy almost every device. My favorite is the Posture Pal, a memory-foam pillow that cradles your head while stretching your shoulders. But even with the most passive fitness tools, it's only weeks before I revert back into a slump.

More lower-back spasms send me to chiropractor and Power Pilates

cofounder Howard Sichel. After a few adjustments, I begin to wonder if my spine's getting addicted to the manipulations. "I can fix your posture temporarily, but unless you start to strengthen your abdominal muscles, nothing will change," he cautions.

Since I'm irrationally afraid of getting too muscular, Sichel recommends pilates to make me stronger and leaner. Originally developed for physical rehab, pilates uses pulleys, springs, and straps to train students to move correctly and increase strength. The idea of working out while lying down is appealing (yes, I'm that lazy), so I give it a try. However, my first workout is so strenuous that I want to throw up. But, at an hour long, it takes about the same time as a chiropractic or physical-therapy session, and I leave the studio feeling pain-free. I guess I can fit exercise into my schedule after all.

A few more months of pilates along with the back yoga classes, and my whole body looks different. My back is stronger, and I'm more toned than ever, which makes me want to stand taller with pride. My second Posture Pro V scan 10 months later shows a dramatic improvement: My head is up, my hands are at my sides, and while my shoulders and hips are still asymmetrical, the difference has decreased. And for the record, I can now touch my toes. **mc**

BACKUP PLAN:
iPosture monitor, \$89.95; Opedix Posture Support Shirt, \$99.95; MBT Lami shoes in Brick, \$230.

For information on where to buy, see Shopping Directory.



TOP: JASMINE VAN HEVEL

Ning Chao