

# THE POSTURE WORKBOOK

**Carolyn Nicholls**

"Every singer, musician or actor will have experienced tensions or postural problems at some stage. The Alexander Technique is a successful way of training the body to cope with these strains; and this book is an indispensable 'self-help' addition to the performer's library."

**Neil Jenkins**  
**Professional Opera Singer**

"With many of us leading busy and pressured lives we often suffer with neck, back and shoulder pain, not to mention stiffness in our fingers after typing for hours. I have been a fan of the Alexander Technique for most of my adult life as I've found it's a way to help my body to continue to serve me. In her comprehensive self-help Posture Workbook Carolyn Nicholls has managed to convey in simple and understandable terms, supported by excellent graphics, how to consciously command our muscles so that we manage pain and stiffness. Carolyn makes her specially designed postural exercises in her 5-a-day plan as easy to incorporate into our daily lives as cleaning our teeth. Benefitting from the wisdom in the Posture Workbook is a must for any active person who wishes to minimise physical discomfort as a result of everyday living."

**Maryon Stewart**  
**Natural Health Expert and TV Presenter**

**Reviews for**  
***Body, Breath and Being: A new guide to the Alexander Technique***  
by Carolyn Nicholls

"Fantastic, great pictures, a very informative practical book. This goes on our reading list for BA and MA students".

**Chris Palmer**  
**Head of Voice and Speech at GSA School of Acting and Musical Theatre**

"I have had Alexander lessons throughout my career, found them invaluable and recommended them to countless other singers. Congratulations to Carolyn Nicholls, who has distilled her many years of teaching into this lucid, down to earth and entertaining book; it will work well for newcomers and devotees alike (singers and normal folk!), whether as introduction to or reminder of this marvellous technique."

**Dame Emma Kirkby**  
**Soprano**

"Carolyn Nicholls' book is much more than a beginner's introduction to the Alexander Technique. Teachers of the technique will also find this book a useful manual for honing their communication skills and expanding their repertoire of handy hints and ideas. Carolyn's expertise as a teacher shows through in her case studies and examples. Using personable, jargon-free language that is easy to follow, she progressively explains the concepts of the Alexander Technique and their value in our busy world. Her book is a pleasure to read."

**Dr Terry Fitzgerald**

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# Introduction

When I was asked to write another book about good body use, based on the Alexander Technique, I thought a great deal about what I wanted to say and how I wanted to say it. The word that kept popping into my head was 'posture'. People are very concerned about posture these days, and rightly so, but there is little of genuine help available to the intelligent student. Posture is a very subtle business and goes well beyond ideas of standing or sitting straight. Posture underpins everything you do – all your activities, such as swimming, horse riding, playing sport or music, as well as things you might not consider activities, such as breathing, circulation and digestion. It plays a part in back pain and other neuromuscular problems. For you to do anything at all you have to move; you have to use your body and your mind. You can't avoid it and you can't separate the two out.

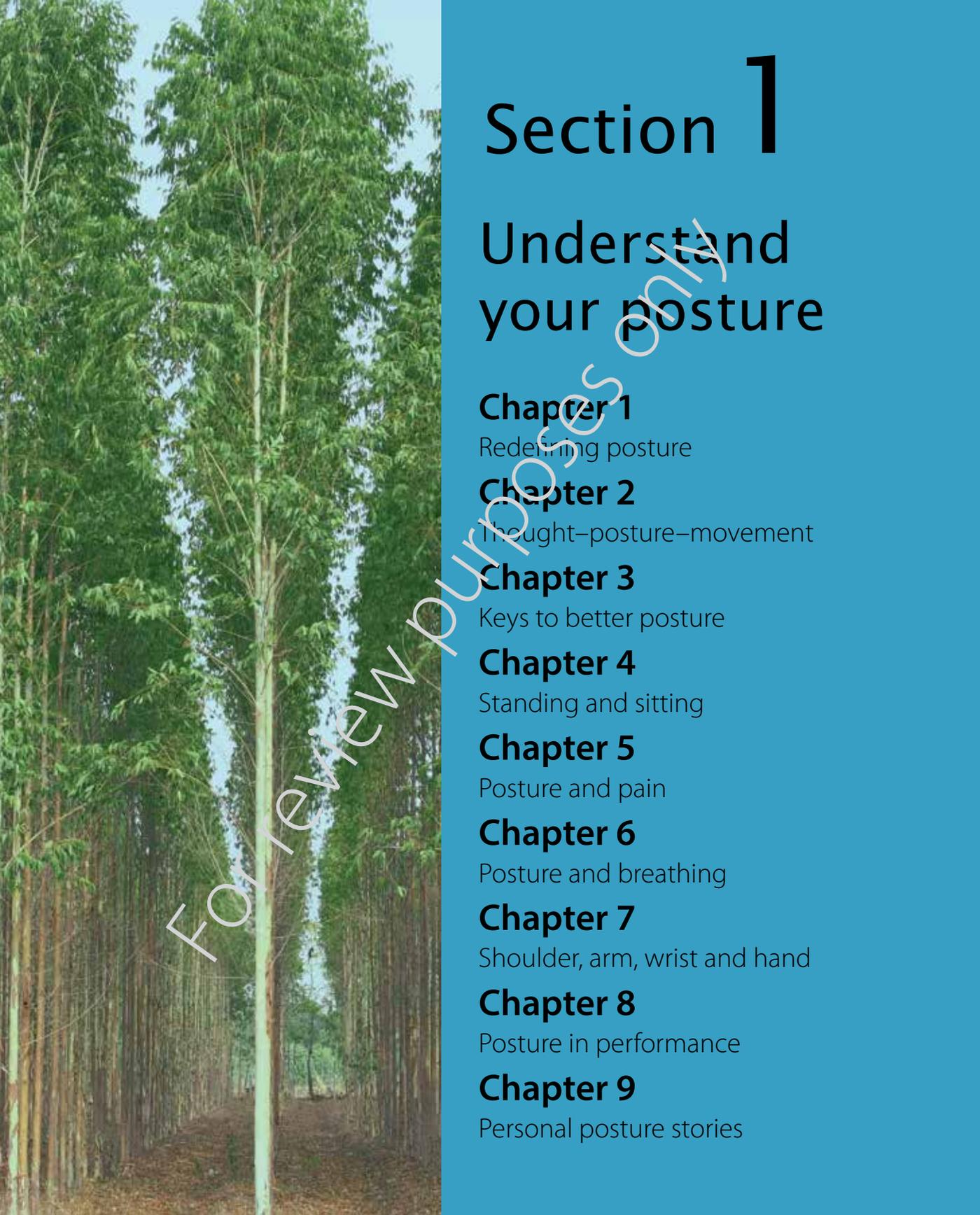
In this book I aim to examine subtle postural tools and offer you ways you can use them in your own life. Over the years I have been teaching good use of the body, I have evolved a series of exercises that help people improve their awareness of what they are doing. This is often the first step to improving posture – an understanding that you might be holding tension in habit patterns that are so deeply ingrained in you they feel normal and you might not even believe you have them. So here, for the first time, I am offering these exercises to you. I hope they will become your manual for movement.

Carolyn Nicholls  
Brighton  
July 2012

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# Section 1

## Understand your posture

### **Chapter 1**

Redefining posture

### **Chapter 2**

Thought–posture–movement

### **Chapter 3**

Keys to better posture

### **Chapter 4**

Standing and sitting

### **Chapter 5**

Posture and pain

### **Chapter 6**

Posture and breathing

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# Chapter 1

## Redefining posture

### This chapter covers:

- what posture is
- the elements of our structure
- habits of mind and body
- how to improve posture through thought–posture–movement

## In search of better posture

Posture and body language are the first thing people notice about us. Confident people use their bodies differently from those who are diffident. A lack of confidence makes us shrink physically into ourselves. Our shoulders narrow, our neck droops forward on our shoulders and our head is retracted down onto our neck. This gives us a defeated look and people are less likely to listen to us if we project that bodily message. Most people are self-conscious about their posture. Either they believe their posture to be poor, or someone has told them it is. Very often, people apologize for their posture or talk about it as if it were separate from them. 'Oh, I have terrible posture' is a common cry.

Posture is not a simplistic matter and the solutions to bad posture are not simple. They require thought. Poor posture deservedly gets a very bad press; back pain and other aches and pains are blamed on it. For many people, posture is the reason they seek out an Alexander teacher's

help (see section 2). But what is posture? Is it about standing up straight, like soldiers on parade? Or pulling your shoulders back so they aren't rounded? Well, it's about more than that. It's a complex mixture of your individual structure, your habits of mind and body, your movement patterns, your breathing and all sorts of complex activities of your nervous system.

### Thought–posture–movement

Many things influence your posture. First there is your own structure, which is largely inherited, but accidents, illnesses, emotions and moods all play a part in creating your posture and are reflected in it. You will usually know if a friend is feeling unwell because they seem to shrink a little; their head and neck are withdrawn into hunched shoulders, and their whole body is slightly droopy. Their body tells you all you want to know about how they are. Posture says so much about us that actors put on and take off postures like a second skin to create their character. Who ever saw a super hero slouching? Not likely – they hold their head up, their chest is open and their shoulders broad. There is no twist or distortion in their back; they certainly don't stand leaning on one hip before they fly off to rescue the world. An actor portraying an unhappy character registers the emotions in their bodies – the bowed head, the hollow chest, the strained face. We all recognize what his body is telling us before he opens his mouth. Why? Because posture tells the world our story.

Most efforts at improving posture – for whatever reason – are either ineffective or short lived. This is mostly because we are often out of touch with exactly what we are doing with ourselves. Attempts to improve posture are made by changing the outside structure, and this always causes trouble. Our habits have such a strong grip on us that the subtleties of our head balance – a very important issue in posture – can pass us by. Our sensitivity can be so off kilter we simply don't know what we are doing. If we are holding ourselves up with excessive tension, this becomes almost hard wired into us, and it feels right and normal and any attempt to change it feels strange and wrong. If we approach things head on – for example by standing up straight or pulling our rounded shoulders back – we are unlikely to succeed because we are still doing the wrong things in the first place. We still have our old posture patterns and our tensions. We usually end up adding another layer of tension on the top of the one we already have, so we try harder and the trying gets us into even deeper trouble.

We need to find a more subtle way of going about things, an indirect way rather than a direct way, so we are changing things from the inside rather than the outside. To do this we have to recognize that posture is a matter not of external shape but of internal organization and this starts with our thinking. Understanding how to project messages to your muscles by directed thought is what informs posture, and posture is the lynch pin of movement. If we want to move well, either to walk about during our day or to do complex things like play instruments, or engage in demanding sports or exercise, our posture is a primary consideration. We will explore this process – thought–posture–movement – throughout this book. My thinking about posture has grown out of my understanding of the Alexander Technique. As a teacher and a trainer I have been involved in good body use for over 30 years.

## Postural role models

We learn posture largely unconsciously, through what we do on our journey from babyhood to upright walking toddler, child, young adult and fully grown individual. On the way to adulthood we model ourselves on our peer group and those whom we admire. If you have a slouching family this is what you see, accept and copy. Going out into the world as a young person your desire to fit in to your surroundings will encourage you to adopt the posture, body habits and body language of those around you whom you either admire or want not to offend. If you are in a situation where walking upright is not considered cool, then you won't walk upright. Many young people don't want to stand out from the crowd and so do whatever it takes to fit in, even if that includes doing uncomfortable things with their bodies, like slouching. Sadly, the consequences can outlast your peer group and long after the need to slouch in order to fit in has passed, you are still slouching. It's become a habit and one that is very hard to challenge and change.

The most usual motivation for changing posture is pain. Ultimately slouching will cause some sort of pain in most people. The long-term effects of compressing your body by slouching will be felt at some point. This can come as a surprise because habits are hard to recognize; it is difficult to believe they are damaging, but they are. It just takes time for them to catch up with you. You might get away with slouching your way through your 20s and develop back pain, or shoulder or neck pain, in your 30s. It can seem to you the pain comes out of the blue – but it didn't, it just got to the point where your unconscious misuse of your posture caught up with you.

## Posture of the past

Less than 100 years ago, an upright posture was considered normal; slouching just didn't happen.



*The fashionable slouch may look cool, but with her head dragging down onto her neck, her shoulders dropped forward and her back compressed as a result, this woman's joints and internal organs will suffer.*

Concepts of good posture are reflected in our language: 'a fine upstanding man' and 'a pillar of the community' are old fashioned phrases that reflect this. There was no question about it, you held yourself upright because everyone else did the same. From childhood to old age, your spine was straight.

## Posture is important

Posture has a profound effect on our health and wellbeing, but most people worry about the look of their posture and don't understand its far reaching implications. Poor posture contributes to back pain and other ills. It also influences



*My grandparents were in their 70s, spry and upright, as they had been all their lives. Both retain a long neck with their heads neither jutting forward nor dragged back, but held centrally. Their shoulders are wide and open, not hunched. They stand easily, with their feet taking their weight evenly. There are no twists or distortions in their frames. After a lifetime of physical labour, both retain freedom of movement in old age. They did not consider themselves unusual, or strive in any way to maintain their posture. An upright frame was their habit, and the habits of those around them. It is not the case now. The chairs they sat in all their lives were flat bottomed with upright backs. They sat very little, usually only to eat their meals; the rest of the time they would be moving around, although in the evenings they would sit in their upright Victorian chairs, my grandmother knitting and my grandfather reading. When they were schoolchildren they sat at desks with a slope to write on. They walked a great deal.*



*When Janet and Lola sit back to back, Janet is 'taller' because she has a long back. When they stand up, Lola's head and shoulders are higher than Janet's.*



*The fifth lumbar vertebra is shown in pink. Notice how long the lumbar area is between the ribs and the pelvis. An extra vertebra here could make you even longer.*

your breathing, digestion and circulation. Your posture directly affects the way you walk, run, play your instrument or sit at your computer.

Posture is more subtle than simply standing or sitting straight. It's the basis of all movement and activities. The impact of posture on your breathing is particularly important. As you age, you tend to use less of your lung capacity, which has a detrimental effect on many body systems. Most obvious are the oxygen levels in your blood. If your breathing is habitually shallow your whole system is sluggish. If you sit in a stuffy room, you generally feel sleepy and a bit stupid; you also feel tired and can't wait to get out, stretch and take in some real air. Shallow breathing is like putting your body in a stuffy room all the time. Your energy levels drop, and you can get into a depressive cycle where you lack energy because you don't have enough oxygen in your system, and so your lungs don't expel the waste products of your blood back into the air as efficiently as they should. That then makes you more sluggish and less inclined to move, which is the very thing you should be doing.

Movement and posture go hand in hand. Breathing and posture go hand in hand, too; it's a love triangle of the best kind. To be well, healthy and functioning easily, you need good posture,

good breathing and to move. Your body is made to move, not to spend all day in a chair.

This book presents for the first time detailed procedures used to change body use and posture profoundly. It explores aspects of posture in a practical way, rather than a theoretical one. It always helps to know a little bit about how we are made, how joints are designed to move and muscles to work, so we explore that too. It helps even more to know a bit about what they are not designed to do.

## Your structure

My sister was six foot tall, and she married a man who was five feet nine inches. When they sat side by side on their garden wall he was taller than her. But when they stood up, she was three inches taller than him. Her height was all in her long legs, a family feature, which has come down through the generations; 'Ah, yes, the Cannon legs,' we exclaim as the latest toddler in the family unfolds long limbs. He had a long back and short legs, and had all his trousers shortened. They were

known as Miss Long Shanks and Mr Short \*\*\*\* (you have to guess that bit). Their individual structure made for different challenges in their lives, as will yours. This individuality is why so many chairs feel uncomfortable. Ironically, chairs that are often referred to as ergonomic are designed for the average person. I have yet to meet this person. If you sit in a chair designed to support your back, but your back isn't where the chair has decided it should be, then the chair won't feel comfortable and won't help your posture. Few of us can afford to have a chair tailor made for us – and even if we could, the moment we moved in it everything would change. So we have to be more intelligent about our posture in the world.

Everybody's structure is unique, as different from another person's as fingerprints. This is one reason why general advice on posture can be so unhelpful for some people and why we don't fit into ergonomic chairs. It would be nice to think we were all made the same way, and to a large extent we are. We all have a spine, with a head balancing on one end, a ribcage, shoulder and pelvic girdles and limbs; but our individual quirks and idiosyncrasies become our challenges, and we need intelligent ways of coping with them.

Just consider the number of lumber vertebrae you are supposed to have – most people have five, but some have six. Most of us have twelve pairs of ribs, but occasionally people have thirteen pairs. These variations might cause problems, or they might not, but if you have such a variation, you have to balance it out in your movement one way or another. Why do some people have longer backs than others, but are still short overall? It's more likely that each vertebra body is slightly longer than 'normal' than that they have an extra vertebra – but only an x-ray will tell that. Whether you do or don't have an extra vertebra, you still have to use it well.

### Long back, long neck

If you have a long back and a long neck you have to coordinate them well if you want to move

easily without pain. If you are also lightly built you have more problems. Add on the possibility of lax ligaments and you are almost bound to run into problems. The word 'gangly' describes this structure nicely. Often it is used in relation to a teenager who has had a big growth spurt, which in itself can be the cause of back pain. For young women who shoot above their friends and above all the boys when they are teenagers, there is the added pressure of not wanting to be tall and consequently stooping, either intentionally or as a byproduct of shyness. Whatever the reason for this type of posture being adopted, it soon becomes fixed and hard to change. It can lead to scoliosis, where the spine curves unnaturally to the side, causing pain and problems. If people with scoliosis have distorted posture it creates harmful pressures on internal organs. Scoliosis can cause the ribcage literally to crush the lungs and put significant strain on the heart. If scoliosis is severe, surgery may be the only option.

### Case Study Kim's Story: when posture really counts

Most people are conscious of their posture, whether as a matter of appearance or because it contributes to back pain or digestive problems. Posture can be a serious health issue for a small number of people, although many have a small degree of scoliosis without any problems.

Kim was diagnosed with severe scoliosis when she was 15. The twist of scoliosis distorted her whole torso; her right shoulder was two inches in front of her left and tugged down into her waist. Her pelvis was twisted so when she stood, thinking she had her feet side by side, she didn't: one foot was in front of the other, and she suffered hip pain as a result of the uneven load on her leg joints.

Teenage scoliosis is measured in degrees. An x-ray of the spine is taken and the angle of 'tilt' is



*A long back and long neck need good organization, as shown here. Mimi's head is poised on her long neck, which in turn is well balanced on the rest of her spine, right down to her sitting bones resting on the saddle. Her shoulder girdle is supported by her well-sprung spine so her arms don't drag on her neck. Her sitting bones and pelvis offer good support for her legs so they are able to lie freely on the saddle. If she were badly organized throughout her head, neck and back, sitting on the saddle would be uncomfortable.*

calculated. Anything over 48 degrees deviation from normal (0 degrees) is serious enough for surgery to be considered. Kim's spine was 44 degrees, a significant problem. The distorted torso can press on internal organs, restricting the heart and lungs, which can be affected by the increased internal pressure. For girls, this could significantly threaten future pregnancies.

Seeking skilled help with her posture, Kim not

only did exercises, but had specialist lessons in the Alexander Technique. These two things worked together for her. Exercises can be very helpful if performed well, but if you are holding on to tension in different areas of your body because your posture is bad, exercises can actually make things worse. Kim learnt how to let her ribs move flexibly when she breathed, and how to maintain a good tone through her back muscles so she used her body in a coordinated way. This is slow work, but it can pay dividends. The last time Kim was measured, the distortion was 28 degrees. This was very good news, but Kim still had to work at her postural support continuously. Like many teenage girls with scoliosis, Kim is tall, nearly six foot, very slender and she has somewhat lax ligaments, and a growth spurt! The Alexander lessons can help her manage all that in a positive way, and can be applied to her exercises and movement when she is walking, or sitting to study. Posture is always with you, no matter what you are doing. Kim still needs monitoring by her orthopaedic specialist and she wears the corset specially designed for her. She is very fit and active and has little pain. The important thing for her is to move in a coordinated way, otherwise her activity will make her distortion worse by reinforcing the 'muscle memory' her body holds.

Kim continued with her lessons for a full year and then it became obvious she did need surgery. She was not disappointed as she felt she had such a lot she could do to help herself, and the year of learning also gave her time to accept her situation. Kim had no pain, apart from in her hip, which was resolved quickly, so it wasn't easy for her to see the need for surgery.

Each case is very different. After her surgery Kim was keener than ever to apply her Alexander knowledge to her posture and activities and she recovered so quickly her surgeon was impressed.



*Sitting like this might seem comfortable when you are young, but you are putting unnecessary and excessive pressure on your neck and lower back. One day it will*



*complain. Look what is happening to the skeletal system when you sit in a heap. What is being squashed internally is even more significant.*

These are some facts about scoliosis:

- Most scoliosis is not painful and is only picked up in examinations, perhaps by a school nurse.
- Scoliosis can be hereditary. If it's in your family – watch out for it!
- Good management is the key to coping.
- Don't ignore it – you will not grow out of it and it will not go away without skilled help

## Habits of mind and body

Some humans love routines; others hate them and seek to avoid them. Our posture and the way we move are largely dominated by our routine ways of doing things, our habits of mind and body. Did you know you can practice tension? If you habitually clench all your muscles, after a while

you don't notice it – but you carry on practicing tension until you are really good at it – and then trouble begins. Winding your legs round the legs of your chair when you sit down is a habit, but not a useful one. The first few times you do it you won't notice anything and it won't hurt you, but as a constant habit, it will put pressure on your back as you sit and re-enforce tension in your legs. This can reduce blood flow to your pelvic area, which is not a good thing. Crossing your legs is often so unconscious a habit it can be hard to break. There is no harm in crossing your legs for a short time if you want to – but if you feel more comfortable with your legs always crossed it's likely to be because your legs are very tense. If that is the case you are likely to want to cross your legs even if you know it's not a good idea. Familiar tension slips below our awareness radar and takes us straight back into our habits.

What if your habit is to pull your body down as you walk or stand? What does this mean to you and why is it a bad idea? This brings us back to



*Most young children have natural good body use, but with a lack of good role models and the prevalence of poor posture all around, it's not hard to see why things go wrong. Good head poise is natural to most youngsters: there is no stiffness in the top 'nodding joint' of the head; their backs are naturally straight; and joints bend easily to allow them to walk, run, squat and perform any movement without pain. Their*

*attention is mostly on exploring their world in a way that is largely tactile, rather than listening to an adult. This natural good use stays with some people for far longer than others, and if you are fortunate to have an easy structure to cope with you may not suffer too much, but as children are introduced to the terrors of sitting still (not a natural thing for a young person), things can start to deteriorate very quickly.*

the effects of poor body use and posture on the things you can't see, such as your lungs, digestive system, circulation and joints. If you habitually stoop, or pull your lower back in with tension, the overall effect is to shorten you. This is easily seen from the outside. What is not visible at all is the extra compression on your joints, the consequent restriction of your respiratory system, and the squashing of your internal organs – which don't like it by the way. You will not notice what you are doing, it might not cause immediate problems, but you could be storing up trouble for later. By the time someone gets to the point of debilitating pain they have been carrying themselves around badly for a long time. If you have the tension habit,

you constantly practice it. Every time you practice it, it feels more natural and undoing it takes time and can be a strange experience.

A drooping neck encourages stiffness in the shoulders, and a depression of the upper thorax so breathing is subtly suppressed. Just this one fact has far reaching consequences. Over a period of time it leads to poor breathing patterns, which reduces lung capacity, makes ribs and diaphragm stiff and impedes free digestion. This drooped neck is sometimes referred to as 'text neck', and might be linked to overuse of texting and computer use generally. The drooped neck is an obvious sign of a pattern of misuse that runs through the whole body.