



THE REHAB ROOM

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Got a Hunch? – Causes and Management of Poor Posture. By David Garrick

Thoracic Kyphosis with Forward Head Posture is a common postural fault seen not only in everyday people but also in triathletes.

This postural fault occurs when there is an excessive rounding of the upper back and an accompanying forwards poking of the chin and head. This may lead to pain in the neck and upper back due to incorrect positioning, chronic adaptations and excessive loading on the spinal column. This postural fault may also then have a knock on effect in other parts of the body it connects with, and can also lead to problems with headaches, shoulder pain, and low back pain as it connects to these areas. The resultant altered posture of the lumbar spine (lower back) due to poor thoracic posture (mid back), may then also cause an increased risk of lower limb muscles strains. So it is of critical importance in the triathlete to try and maintain good posture.

Furthermore, and importantly for all athletes, this type of poor posture can also lead to decreased athletic performance as a slouched posture will mean less lung expansion and air into your lungs with less oxygenation of your muscles while exercising and hence a lower VO₂. As a swimmer an increased thoracic kyphosis is not ideal as it will limit your shoulder mobility and reach meaning a less efficient stroke and increased risk of shoulder pain. Hence, this is something we look for in screening the swimming athlete. In addition continual internal rotation forces required with freestyle can cause imbalances around the shoulder girdle causing the pectoral (chest) muscles to tighten and the shoulders to drop forwards so this also should be monitored.

Certain pathological spinal conditions such as Scheuermann's disease and osteoporosis will lead to poor posture but these are not the norm and generally postural abnormalities will develop over time due to continued bad habits often starting from an adolescent age. Lots of time at a desk in a society that is very computer dominant does not help this, and even in an elite athlete sitting around or traveling between events with bad sitting position does not help. Therefore good work set up and sitting posture is critical for any desk worker or athlete. As a triathlete, long hours slouched over the bike handles can contribute to poor posture as well as then running in a fatigued state after this. Bike set up and training structure is therefore also a consideration as a triathlete.

Common poor posture findings of the neck and upper back are:

- Excessive rounding of your thoracic spine (mid to upper back)
- Tightness of the muscles and stiffness of the joints around the neck and thoracic spine
- Tightness in the pectoral muscles with rounding of the shoulders
- Weakness of the retractor muscles around the shoulder blades that hold your shoulders back as well as your neck retractors which hold your neck in alignment.

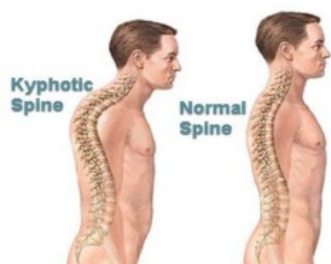
A noted effort to maintain better posture as well as good work set up and regular breaks from your desk can help improve your posture. Taping the back as a physical cue, or visual/verbal cues on the computer that flash up can help. Exercises can be used to try and help correct abnormalities by stretching out tightness and strengthening any weaknesses. Some of these are shown in picture examples below.

A physiotherapist can offer postural assessment and suitable correction exercises to try and prevent further problems.

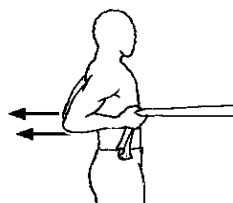
Happy racing!

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Example of poor posture with thoracic kyphosis and forward head position; and normal posture.



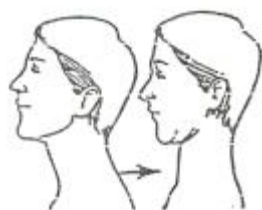
Scapula retraction exercise with theraband. 4 x 10 repetitions with 5 second hold. There are many variants of this.



Thoracic extension foam roller exercise: 3-5 minutes daily



Doorway chest stretches: 5 x 20 seconds daily



Chin Tuck exercise: 30-40 repetitions with 3-5 second hold daily