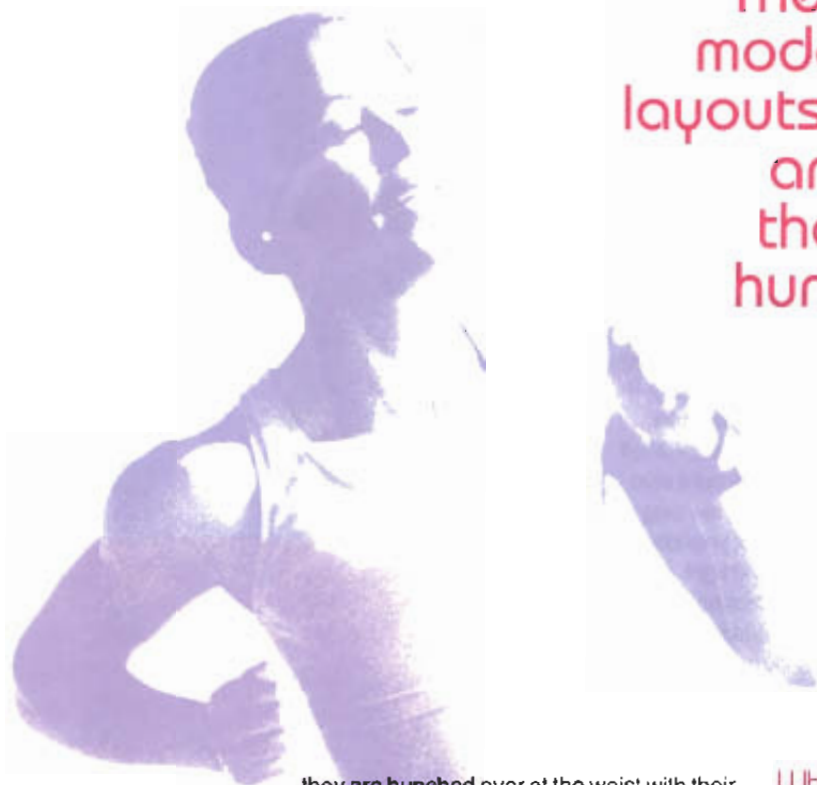


# PERFECT YOUR POSTURE

RUNNING IS A GREAT WAY TO GET FIT AND A BRILLIANT WAY TO BURN CALORIES, BUT IF YOUR POSTURE IS INCORRECT, YOU MAY BE AT RISK OF INJURY. PERSONAL TRAINER, **JEFF ARCHER** EXPLAINS WHY GOOD POSTURE IS SO CRUCIAL FOR RUNNING.

'There's so much in modern life – office layouts, cars, phones, and computers – that put us in the hunched position'



**E**veryone can do it and for some it can be one of the most enjoyable and exhilarating experiences going. For others, it's the most frustrating and painful thing they ever try to do. Running is probably the most fundamental and simple method of exercising and requires practically no equipment – Zola Budd didn't even need running shoes, and streakers can do it without any clothes, so how come it works so well for some and not so well for others?

### Why did you hate running?

Many people are put off running by memories of the school cross-country course, the wind and the snow and the bullying games teachers who loved to send us round 'just one more lap'. But that was a while ago and things have hopefully moved on, so it's useful for those of you who have negative memories of running to perhaps give it another go and see if you enjoy it more this time around. You might surprise yourself – many novice runners are dead set against the idea at first and end up completing fun runs, half marathons and even marathons. It's addictive, it's satisfying and it can be great fun.

### How should you run?

So what's important to remember when running? Think for a moment about those people you've seen who made running look difficult – I'm sure you've seen them. Usually

they are hunched over at the waist with their shoulders rounded and their legs shuffling along underneath them. They look like they're struggling to breathe and, at worst, might keel over any moment. So what's going wrong?

To a certain extent, running is a state of mind. Many people approach running cautiously, thinking, 'I look at others running and it seems so effortless – I want to look like that when I'm running.' The answer to this is to imagine that your running is effortless and it will become more so over time. Remove all images of running being difficult from your mind and instead visualise yourself bounding along easily. If you think you're light on your feet, you will be light on your feet, and you'll enjoy your running so much more.

### Why is running so good for you?

Running is a whole body exercise involving heart and lungs for delivering blood and oxygen to the working muscles; major muscles for moving – arms, legs, shoulders, chest and back; and more minor muscles for stabilising as you run. It's this latter part of the equation that often gets overlooked, which can be a mistake.

When you walk or run, you are propelled by the motion of your legs, primarily the front and backs of your thighs which act as the mobilising muscles. These will move you while the muscles in your bottom and stomach – the stabilising muscles – keep your body in alignment and keep you upright. This is the physiologically correct way to move, tried and tested over years of human evolution. Things begin to go wrong if we move away from this balance.

### Why do we get injured?

A simple example of where things can go wrong is if we have weak stomach and bottom muscles that aren't up to the job of stabilising us as we run. If we choose to run, we'll make ourselves do it somehow – one thing that's amazing about the body is that it does its best to do as it's told – so if the muscles that are designed to do the stabilising aren't operating this function, what is? Well it's usually the muscles that are also trying to move us at the same time, so eventually they become overloaded. A secondary problem you may face if your stabilisers aren't working to full capacity is that you slouch as you run, which makes it difficult to breathe and to move your arms properly in order to run comfortably. Over time, running like this can cause long-term injury to your hamstrings, calves, back, neck and shoulders.

### How can you run well?

So what's the secret of successful running? Firstly you must train your core stability muscles to stabilise you properly and for increasing amounts of time. Your core stability muscles include your pelvic muscles, your deep stomach muscles (transversus abdominis and obliques) and your bottom muscles (gluteals). The good news is that these areas are easy to exercise and you can be working them at any given point of the day.

Switching your stomach muscles on or off makes the difference between sitting in a slouched position or sitting upright. If you make yourself sit upright, your stomach muscles will be on and you can feel them ▶

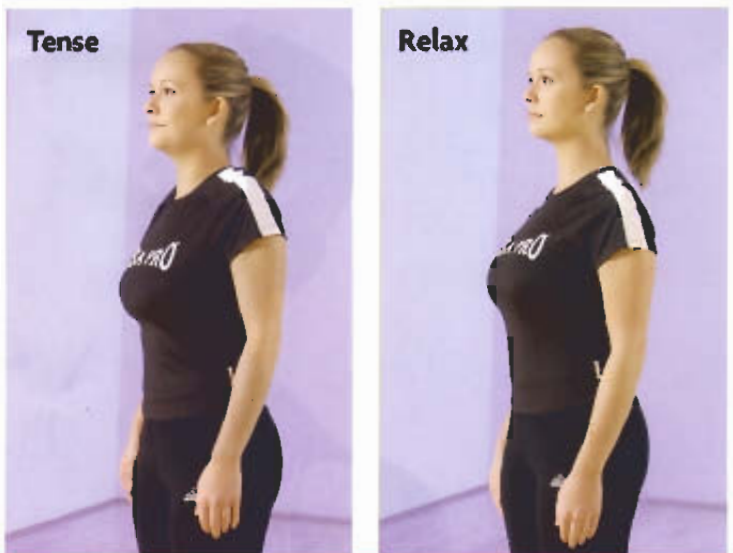
**'If you're slouched at the top half, it's very difficult to lift your knees as you run, and the backs of your legs then try to do too much work'**

working immediately. Practise doing this as often as you can to encourage endurance in these muscles. To ensure you work as much of this area of your body as you can, always tighten your pelvic floor and imagine that you have a string tied around your tummy which won't let you relax your stomach completely. If you're really keen you can even tie on a real piece of string. You'll notice that as you sit up straight, your shoulders will fall back and down. This is not only more comfortable but it also alleviates tension in your neck and chest. If you sit too long with your shoulders drooped forwards, the muscles of your chest and the front of your shoulders become short and tight, and eventually you may find it increasingly difficult to straighten up fully. The benefit of good posture while sitting and standing is that you are always more upright and instantly look taller, thinner and healthier. Your back is also safer as it's protected by the muscles working around it.

### Why is good posture so important?

The benefits of good posture for running are that by having your shoulders relaxed you can swing your arms more freely which

Using a Swiss Ball to exercise can help to sort out your posture. Just sitting on the Ball makes you sit upright in the correct position, and you could even use the Ball in place of a chair when sitting at your desk.



Try the exercise above to feel when you're in the correct standing posture. Stand up straight with your head looking straight ahead and your neck muscles and shoulders relaxed, then tense (raise) your shoulders and hold for five seconds, before dropping them down and back and letting your arms hang freely. Repeat slowly 10 times and enjoy the feeling of letting your shoulders go.

will encourage your legs to move more freely. With your shoulders back, your chest is open and you can breathe deeply and easily to get plenty of oxygen to your lungs and muscles.

### From top to bottom

**So much for the top half** of your body. The benefit of good posture and engaging the right stabilising muscles for the lower body, is that it leaves your legs free to run in the easiest, safest and most energy-efficient way. If you're slouched at the top half, it's difficult to lift your knees as you run, and the backs of your legs then try to do too much work, which can lead to pulled hamstrings or calf muscles. If you're upright and relaxed, you can more easily distribute the work evenly through your major leg muscles.

### How can you check your posture?

A good way to gauge correct posture is to stand with your back to a wall and see if you can touch your heels, bottom, shoulder blades and back of your head to the wall. If you can examine yourself from the side at the same time you're looking for a vertical line running down from your ear lobes, shoulders, hips, knees and ankles. This position feels rather awkward but only because most of us are used to living and working with our shoulders slumped and head jutting forwards. There's so much in modern life – office layouts, cars, phones, and computers – that put us in the hunched position that we really have to work at it to stay upright. Once you know what it's like to feel your body in this position you can practise assuming it as you go about your daily routine. Gradually a more upright position will become your 'normal' position, allowing you to move effectively and efficiently and stay injury-free while walking, running, exercising and living life to the full.

So next time you go for a run, remember to switch on your stomach muscles and get your shoulders back and down. Breathe deeply, lift your knees at the front, and for maximum enjoyment, think Paula Radcliffe, not third-year winter games lessons. ■

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