

The Alexander Technique: Can It Heal Your Back Pain?

Use the Alexander Technique to improve your posture, fight pain, and feel better all over.

BY READER'S DIGEST EDITORS FROM THE BOOK DOCTORS' FAVORITE NATURAL REMEDIES

This therapy was developed by Frederick Matthias Alexander, an Australian-born actor, in the early 20th century. When working, he was irritated by bouts of hoarseness and was unable to obtain satisfactory medical advice. While watching himself in a mirror he found that his posture greatly affected his voice and that he often moved his head back and down and tensed his neck and throat, which impaired his breathing.

Alexander became interested in the effects of posture and developed his own method to “retrain” the head, neck, shoulders, and torso to move correctly. Alexander called this process the “Primary Control,” for he believed that all correct body movement would flow from correcting faults in the head and upper torso. In particular, he believed extended sitting or standing were problematic, as they compress the neck and spine. Alexander’s clients included the actress Lily Langtry and the writer George Bernard Shaw.

How the Alexander Technique Works

The Alexander Technique focuses on self-awareness and encourages patients to observe and “unlearn” habitual responses that interfere with the body’s natural movements. Typically, a patient is taught to sit, arise, stand, and walk in new ways that are less stressful to the body. Patients are re-educated to correct faulty alignment, primarily of the upper parts of the body, and are shown exercises that will help to lengthen and free the neck and spine.

This gentle technique may be of assistance for people with scoliosis (spinal curvature), lordosis (swayback syndrome) or rounded shoulders. Arthritis, jaw pain, and back and neck pain may also be improved, along with balance in the elderly. Breathing and digestive disorders may even be improved with the technique, since poor posture negatively affects the lungs and digestive system.

How to Stand According to the Alexander Technique

Simply learning the right way to stand can put less strain on muscles and joints. Slouching is clearly an unnatural stance, but people often overcorrect this, standing extra upright and stiff, which is equally harmful. An Alexander Technique teacher will show you how to “stand tall” in a relaxed and balanced way.

A Visit to the Alexander Technique Practitioner

You remain clothed throughout while the practitioner first observes your normal ways of sitting, standing and moving and then teaches you small, subtle changes to adopt that will restore balance and ease to the body. You may be taught in small classes or individually. The length of a course varies, from between 15 and 30 lessons: Changing the postural habits of a lifetime takes time and practice.

Safety First

Tell your practitioner if you are pregnant or affected by musculoskeletal injuries or chronic disease to ensure your program is tailored to your specific needs.