

STAND UP STRAIGHT!

IMPROVING SHOULDER FLEXIBILITY AND POSTURE



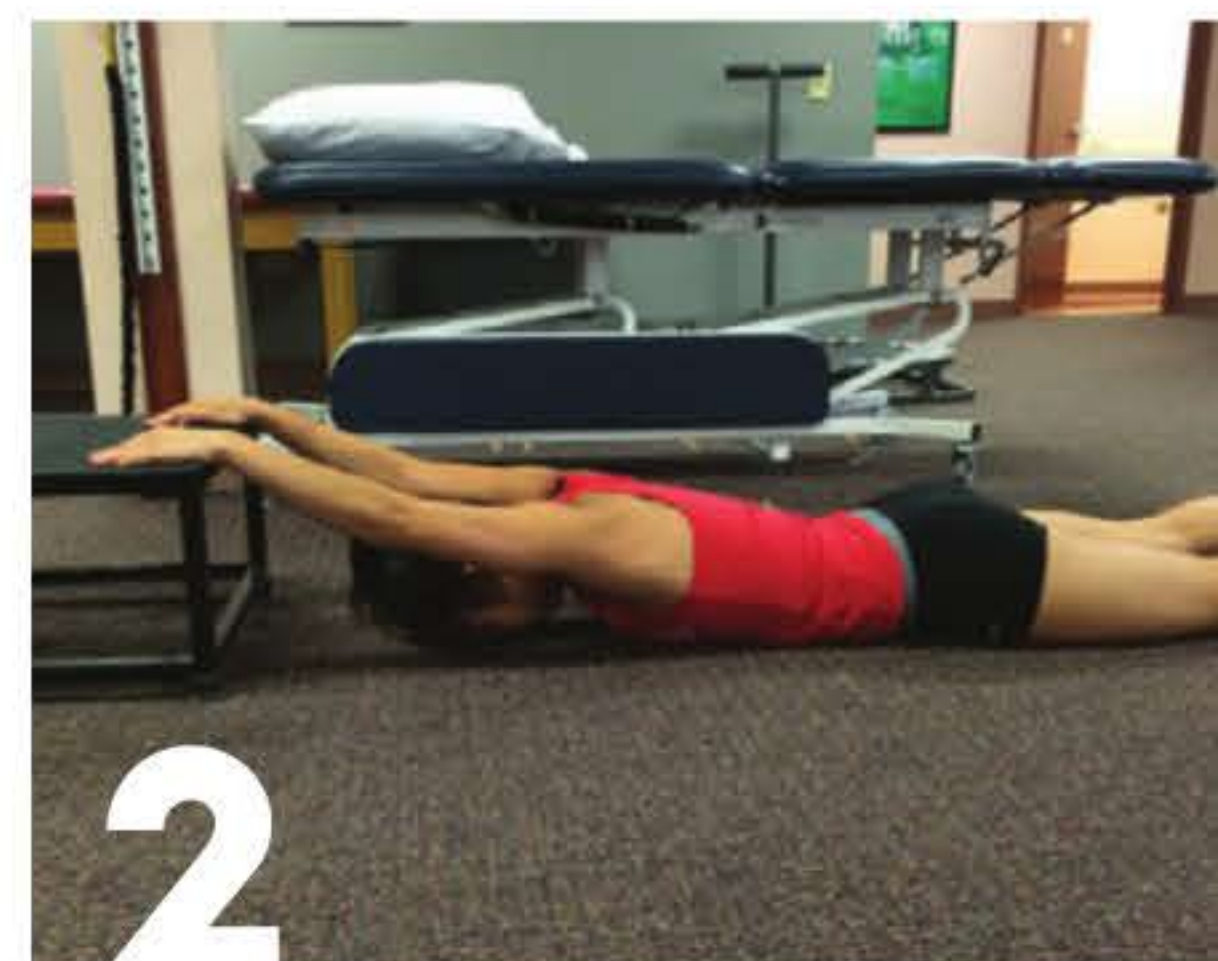
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The importance of shoulder and upper back flexibility cannot be underestimated. In addition to being necessary for arm positioning during elements, it adds a sense of maturity, sophistication and grace to your presentation, whether in your posture, or simply in the extension of your motion. Due to postural muscle fatigue, as well as the fact that most dancers begin elite development in their teen years, we are forced to fight the battle against a lifestyle that lends itself to forward rounded shoulders, hunched backs and dropped heads.

From typing and writing to the use of electronic devices, school desks and driving, our daily lives get in the way of teaching our muscles how to stay in proper position. The muscles over time go through what we call “adaptive shortening.” A muscle, if you will, is lazy, and only wants to be stressed or pulled longer if the demand is there.

Let’s take the pec, or chest muscle, for example. The pec is longer when the arms are reached out to the side, often times with an arch, and shortened when the arms or shoulders are rounded forward. If we spend more time in the shortened position than the lengthened one, the muscle gets used to being here. Then, when asked to stretch and pull, it “resists,” causing poor arm positioning in dance, which can result in injury in the upper back.

Here are just a few exercises that can be done to encourage flexibility in the arms and shoulders, and help with the maintenance of good posture. These can be done before dancing, but more importantly after studying, driving or sitting for long periods of time to undo the tightness!



1. Find a doorway. It can be at home, dance or school. Stand in the opening, and put the arm that you want to stretch on the doorjamb, palm forward, straight overhead. Lunge your legs for balance and simply lean forward stretching your armpit area, ribs and chest. Hold for 10 to 15 seconds and repeat. If you feel numbness in your hands, take a break and start again.

2. Find something high like a box or a couch. Lay on your stomach, with your hands on top of the object, arms straight. Keep your chest down, and try to not activate your lower back, let your body relax until you feel a pull in your chest and armpit area. Take deep breaths, each time letting your body sink a little more. Hold for 10 to 15 seconds at a time. Repeat two to three times.

3. Grab a partner and sit while your partner stands behind you. Lace your hands together behind your head, elbows back and sit as straight as you can. Your partner will place the side of his or her leg to touch your back to help you remain straight. Your partner then gently pulls back on your elbows, while you tighten your abs to make sure your lower back does not arch. Hold for 30 to 45 seconds.

4. Upper back/shoulder stretch with arch. This exercise requires a partner. The focus is on the combination of the upper back, shoulders and arch. While laying on the ground, grab your partner’s ankles. Push up to bridge. Your partner then reaches underneath your shoulder blades and pulls toward them, while you focus on keeping your arms as straight as you can. You should not feel pain in your lower back; you should feel the stretch in your shoulders and upper back. Hold for 5 to 10 seconds. Repeat two to five times, gently lowering down between sets.

With these stretches and a little bit more focus on standing up straight, your range of motion in your arms and upper back should improve and really show in your performance.

