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Posture perfect

See our Sun Run coverage in Monday's Vancouver Sun

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When most people talk about training for a race or an event, they emphasize drive, motivation, dedication to training; mindsets that will assuredly push you forward to the finish line.

CREDIT:

Rob Williams of Mixx Co-Fitness Studio helps Serene achieve neutral posture.

The last thing you want to be is neutral, a term that connotes all the drive of a couch potato in a beige condo.

But neutrality is all Rob Williams cares about when he deals with athletes.

Williams is a kinesiologist and majority partner of Mixx Co-Fitness and Performance Posture Specialists in Vancouver. He lives for the plumb line.

Neutral to him means the spine is aligned properly. If it isn't, injuries will inevitably result.

"If you are a runner, repetitive stress that is unbalanced or asymmetrical will result in wear and tear," he says. "If you have a sore knee, it's not necessarily anything wrong with the knee per se, it's the uneven stress on the knee because of alignment problems."

Williams sees all ages of runners. They come to him with neck or upper back pain which he can see is directly related to their running positions.

Sometimes when they run, their heads sink into their shoulders, their upper bodies lean forward and their shoulders round into their chests.

That posture, so commonly seen on Vancouver's sea walls, knocks the body out of neutral and gradually causes disk degeneration and neck or upper back pain, he says, noting the body should lean a bit while running.

"Dynamic posture isn't ramrod straight because you are moving forward. But you want the head held up so that you minimize the muscular effort in upper back and neck."

That stooped and forward leaning posture also restricts performance by

compressing the chest which limits the ability to breathe deeply.

"If I want to run at my best, I don't want a flexed spine and pressure on my lungs to restrain my ability to take a breath," he says.

Injuries caused by poor posture is a surprisingly common problem.

Williams gave a workshop to 60 Sun Run clinic leaders recently and asked them if they had any aches and pains they would attribute to posture.

Forty-five raised their hands. But only three of them had had their posture thoroughly analyzed.

If they did get analyzed, Williams predicts that most would have standing postures that deviate significantly from neutral.

"The body functions best in the neutral alignment," he says. "The nerves flow better, the blood flows better, the muscles work better. There is less stress on the joints and bony structures of the body.

You might end up with one leg longer than the other, you might get iliotibial band syndrome, medial or lateral knee pain, or foot issues such as plantar fasciitis.

Posture isn't just an issue for us regular slouches. Even elite athletes need to embrace neutrality.

Nathan Taylor, a sprinter with Canada's national track and field team, Olympic hopeful and a kinesiologist in Williams' clinic developed a hamstring strain last year that vexed him for four months.

When Williams corrected his posture and got him orthotics for his left foot, the hamstring problem disappeared.

Williams isn't suggesting that people address their posture before they start exercising, but he does hope they become aware of the potential harm they could cause and address it while training.

It doesn't take long before something gives, he warns.

All hail the beige.

To check your own posture go to www.performanceposturespecialists.com

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