

OPTIMAL HEALTH UNIVERSITY™

Presented by Dr. Dean Brown

Is Your Sleep Position Affecting Your Spine?

Some people sleep on their stomachs. Others sleep on their side or back. And then there are those who toss and turn throughout the night: starting on their backs, flailing over to one side, then the other, before doing a belly flop.

Does it really matter what position you sleep in, as long as you sleep? Yes, according to Dr. Brown — an answer that is substantiated by numerous studies. Read on to learn which sleep posture is the best and which is the worst.



Sleep Posture

Eight hours of sleep — a full third of your day — is what most health-care professionals suggest for their patients. Even if you only average six or seven hours of slumber each night, it still adds up to a considerable amount of “down time” for your body.

Imagine sitting at your desk for six or seven hours, hunched over the computer keyboard with your legs tucked under the chair and the monitor at an improper angle. When you did finally try to get up, your entire body would mount a protest.

The same thing happens to the body after a night of improper sleep posture. When proper bedtime posture isn't maintained, spinal bones (vertebrae)

become misaligned: a condition known as *vertebral subluxation*.

How do doctors of chiropractic, like Dr. Brown, identify vertebral subluxations? They begin with a health history and wellness assessment. A history of physical trauma, deskwork, improper sleep posture, repetitive movement, involvement in sports, inactivity or high-stress levels boost the risk of vertebral subluxations.

Back is Best

The optimum sleep position is back-to-mattress, with the head and neck cradled in a cervical or down-filled pillow.

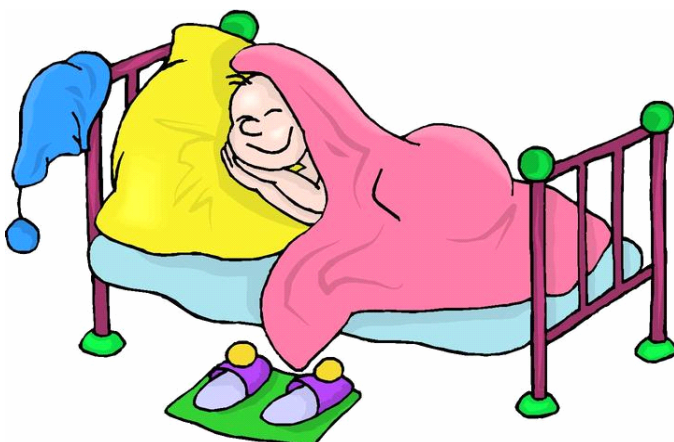
The goal is to keep the spine as close to its normal alignment as possible.

The normal curves are cervical lordosis (c-shaped curve with apex in the anterior of the mid-neck), thoracic kyphosis (apex in the posterior of the upper back) and lumbar lordosis (apex in the anterior of the low back).

Sleeping on your back keeps your hips aligned evenly. When the curves are over-exaggerated or reversed, you risk vertebral subluxations and related disorders such as arthritis.

It's no wonder that vertebral subluxations trigger musculoskeletal pain, explains Dr. Brown. After all, vertebrae are attached to muscles and other bones via tendons and ligaments. One glance at an anatomical diagram of the back and neck shows that, in one way or another, all the muscles and bones in this region are connected.

A misaligned vertebra disrupts the intricate dance between muscles and bones. This disruption creates a state of imbalance, exerting stress on connecting structures and producing discomfort.



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Stomach Snoozers

Sleeping on your stomach is the worst position for your spine. It torques the spine of the neck, reversing the normal curve, and forces rotation.

Arm pain is another pitfall of stomach sleeping. It's not unusual for a stomach sleeper to extend one arm over or under a pillow. The pain, not surprisingly, is connected to the overstretching of the arm throughout the night. This prolonged position restricts the blood supply to the rotator cuff, "a contributing factor to shoulder impingement." (*Physical Therapy* 2001;81:30.)

And that's not all. Stomach sleeping can even result in night bruxism — the grinding of teeth while asleep. This condition may be triggered by face pressure against the pillow, which is alleviated by back sleeping.

Bruxism is associated with temporomandibular disorder (TMD). Anything that upsets the normal position or alignment of the jaw can lead to this disorder — including a misaligned neck, an uneven bite, orthodontic work, teeth grinding and sleeping on your side.



Since misalignments of the spine are associated with jaw dysfunction, doctors of chiropractic take a holistic approach to correcting TMD. Depending on your unique biomechanics, your chiropractor may work on your jaw joint directly, your neck or both.

Side Sleepers

In addition to setting the stage for TMD, sleeping on your side puts substantial pressure on the hips. A pillow between the knees helps to significantly straighten the spine.

While some side sleepers keep their legs out straight, others curl up into a ball: fetal style. The latter has long been heralded as optimum because it is the most spine-friendly.

Sleeping Like a Stone

A two-year study at the University of California at San Francisco (UCSF) has generated some surprising results: Men who consistently sleep on one side of their body are much more likely to develop kidney stones. Of the 93 patients — all with recurring kidney stones — 75 percent developed kidney stones *only* on the side they slept on.

An article on the study quoted Marshall Stoller, MD, a UCSF professor of urology, as saying, "Sleeping in the same position each night appears to alter bloodflow to that kidney, impairing the organ's ability to clear itself of stone-forming crystals and deposits." (*Men's Health* 2001;16:26.)

Pillow Talk

In addition to correct body position, it's important to ensure proper head position during sleep. And that means the right pillow.

Specialized cervical pillows are often helpful, as they provide optimum support. Your doctor of chiropractic can order one for you, or tell you where to purchase one. Old-fashioned down pillows are also a wonderful option.

Buckwheat-hull pillows are another great alternative to feathers and foam. They're also pretty cool ... literally! The buckwheat doesn't retain heat and wicks away moisture

from your neck, perfect for those sweltering summer nights. It is also extremely malleable, providing a perfect fit. Just don't try to make pancakes with it!



"The ideal pillow should be soft and not too high, should provide neck support and should be allergy-tested and washable. A neck pillow with good shape and consistency and with firm support for cervical lordosis can be recommended as a part of treatment for neck pain." (*J Manipulative Physiol Ther* 1998;21:237-40.)

Sweet Dreams

The best way to ensure sweet dreams is by practicing proper sleep posture and selecting the right pillow. If you wake up stiff and sore in the morning, talk with your doctor of chiropractic about ways to modify your sleep behavior. Your doctor may also suggest additional treatment options.

And, if you haven't had a chiropractic checkup recently, make an appointment today to prevent sleep-related pain.

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