



Postures for Optimal Growth, Health, and Beauty: How the Tongue Supports Our Facial and Spinal Development

Question: *What do a ballerina, an 8-month-old baby, and a yoga or tai chi practitioner have in common? (Sounds like the beginning of a silly joke.)*

Answer: They all have an intrinsic awareness of what it feels like for their body to be properly upright, and they naturally seek to maintain that postural alignment.

In this article, we're going to explore the most common reason why folks wind up experiencing a systematic breakdown of posture over time. We'll also share two simple, related postural solutions from our decades of studying the Asian longevity arts. By weaving them together, we can help restore postural health as well as reduce (and even eliminate) jaw pain. These solutions can also give us greater energy, vitality, and clarity in our daily lives.

Here are the two postural precepts we'll explore today...

1. Upthrust your head as if it's upholding the roof
2. Upthrust your tongue to your upper palate (which we call finding "home" for your tongue)

Throughout this article, we'll unpack these two tai chi postural principles and share how they can create massive positive change in your daily life. We'll also walk through the breakdown of the healthy human structure that happens when we don't apply these postural strategies. The good news is that we can begin the process of healing to halt and even reverse posture-related whole-body degradation. All we have to do is learn to maintain the tongue in the "home position" and habituate an upright head posture. With that in place, let's jump in...

The Importance of Breathing Through the Nose

We're designed to breathe through our noses. From Western medicine models to the ancient Asian wellness systems like the practice of chi kung in tai chi and pranayama in yoga, everyone agrees that normal (and optimal) human function is to breathe through the nose. In fact, the nose and sinus cavity are part of our immune system's first line of defense. They're the perfect "trap" to capture toxins before they get farther into the system and reach the lungs (where they can do real harm).

So if we're designed to breathe through our noses, then why do we regress to mouth breathing?

Structural and Environmental Insults That Disrupt Normal Human Breathing

Through no fault of our own, in childhood, many of us developed the habit of mouth breathing as a normal reaction to impaired breathing through the nose. We all experience this natural regression when we have a stuffy nose from allergies or a cold. If we're not really able to breathe through the nose, we will automatically regress to mouth breathing.

Unfortunately, many children have chronic irritation in their sinuses and/or tonsils. There are too many potential environmental factors to explore here. However, one common contributing factor is often the Standard American Diet (aka 'SAD' diet), which is full of irritants. Since breathing through their nose is difficult, these children begin breathing through their mouths. Just like an improper swallow reflex, if we develop a mouth-breathing habit at an early age, it becomes hardwired in our neuromuscular system as our norm. To breathe through our mouth, we have to remove the tongue from the "home position" on the roof of the mouth. So, the initial insult, or breakdown, to our posture is the tongue settling on the floor of the mouth due to chronic mouth breathing. At this point, let's explore why these two postural strategies are crucial to our long-term oral (and whole-body) health.

Posture Secret #1: Upthrust Your Head as if It's Holding Up the Roof

Since the early 1990s, we've been teaching these postural concepts to students ranging from kids as young as 5 to seniors in their 80s.

The best way we've learned to explain this "upthrust your head" concept is to imagine that you're a puppet that has a string attached to the crown of your head.

In fact, let's give it a try right now. Mentally feel for the top of your head. (Hint: The true crown is farther back than most people initially think. If you'd like to start by finding it with your fingers, find the center of the top of your skull. Then move your fingers toward the back of your head, and when you reach the highest point, that's the crown.)

Imagine that you're hanging like a marionette puppet from this one central string that's gently pulling you upwards from the crown of your head. Feel your head (and neck and spine) being gently lifted from this string.

Now, tune into your body and notice what you feel while doing this. How does your body adjust when you do this simple exercise? Most of us sit up a little taller. We adjust our common forward-head, hunched posture. Our back and neck feel a little more "straight up" than before this alignment check. (As a quick aside, this upward lifting is gentle. It's not the rigid stance that was expected when someone told us to "sit up straight" as kids.)

How would your life be different if you remembered to suspend yourself like a puppet from an imaginary string from the crown of your head once every hour? Would your neck muscles be a little less stressed? Maybe you would be able to take healthy, deep, abdominal-based breaths more easily and naturally? Would your digestion improve? Perhaps all of the above and more?

In terms of jaw health, many folks find that the chin and lower jaw retract a bit when they do this "hanging from the crown of the head" posture adjustment. This reduces jaw joint tension (and pain!).

As we practice hanging from our central imaginary string, let's explore secret #2. These two postural secrets weave together synergistically to create a fantastic basis for ideal whole-body alignment.

Posture Secret #2: Find the "home" for your tongue (aka "upthrust your tongue to the roof of your mouth")

Where is your tongue right now? When our mouth is at rest, the first two-thirds of our tongue should be resting against the roof of our mouth. That's the location where we were designed to keep our tongue when we're not eating, drinking, talking, or singing. It's what we here at OraWellness call the "home" position. Unfortunately, somewhere along the way, we all lost the "Body Owner's Handbook" that teaches this important alignment tool.

Feel your upper palate with your tongue. Notice that it's a dome.

When our tongue is in the "home" position, its tip rests on the alveolar ridge. The tip of the tongue is not touching our front teeth, but rather a short distance behind them. The rest of the first two-thirds of the tongue is nestled into the domed upper palate. The lips are closed, and we should be breathing through our nose.

We don't need to apply a bunch of force to keep the tongue in the home position. Instead, the combination of the lips being closed and the surface of the tongue being up against the upper palate should provide a gentle suction that keeps the tongue in place for us.

Why It's So Important For the Tongue to be in the "Home" Position

The dome of the upper palate is malleable. Just like our teeth can shift over time, our upper palate also changes as it's continually exposed to various forces.

Thankfully, keeping the tongue in the home position helps prevent unwanted upper palate shape changes. This simple action provides a resistant support against the downward and side-to-side forces that are constantly being applied to our upper jaw, thanks to things like gravity (downward force), pressure from our cheeks (side-to-side force), etc.

Without the tongue in its home position, the ever-present force of gravity takes its toll. The upper palate dome begins to collapse. In addition, the tongue not being in the home position can also allow the upper dental arch to collapse over time. (See our resource on how to straighten teeth without braces.)

When the dome of the palate and the upper dental arch lose structure, it directly infringes on our airway. That's when we may start to develop issues like snoring.

What Happens to the Head and Neck Posture When Mouth Breathing Becomes the Norm?

If we don't develop the habit of resting the tongue on the upper palate and we don't support our neck and back by hanging like a puppet from a string at the crown of our head, we break our upright alignment. From there, the breakdown of head and neck posture winds up impacting our jaw health.

Here's an example of proper upright alignment. The tongue is "home" up against the dome of the mouth, and the model is breathing through her nose. Her posture is upright. She's feeling the sensation of hanging like a puppet from a string from the crown of her head.

When the mouth is open for breathing, it degrades the natural upright alignment. When the tongue is not habituated in the "home" position, the upper neck tends to hinge just below the base of the skull, tilting the head back and pushing forward the throat and lower jaw.

If you try this right now, you can feel how allowing the jaw and throat to shift forward means that you've lost the sense of hanging from a string at your crown.

This is often the first outwardly obvious break in head/neck/back alignment. Once this postural break has occurred, the pull on the neck musculature increases. Then it's only a matter of time before the head drops forward. With the head forward, the shoulders round forward, too.

(As a side note, when we habitually hunch and round our shoulders, that tends to shorten the chest muscles over time. This puts strain on our back, and it can also lead us to develop a habit of shallow, chest-based breathing.)

Like a collapsing building or dominoes falling, piece by piece (vertebrae by vertebrae), our body's natural upright alignment comes tumbling down. Once we lose all intrinsic sense of healthy, upright alignment, we may start to wonder why we're often exhausted and foggy-headed. Over time, we may also begin to notice a whole host of other signs of breakdown, like chronic neck or jaw tension.

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Reversing the Loss of Structural Integrity

Here's the good news...

We can reverse out of this dysfunctional pattern and begin the path to recovery with our two postural precepts. The key is to implement these two strategies regularly and habituate this upright posture as our new "normal" set point.

So let's do it again right now.

Quick body scan: Where's your tongue? If it's not in the home position, we encourage you to "slide it home" now. (Try to get that natural vacuum suction.)

Next, how's your head/ neck/spine posture? Are you hanging like a puppet from a string from the crown of your head? Remember, it's gentle, like you're being lifted from this single string. Feeling the subtlety of this lift can bring some very wonderful sensations throughout the whole body.

Action item: What about setting a reminder on your phone? It could nudge you every hour so you notice and reset your alignment.

Please be gentle with yourself. Even after practicing these strategies for many decades, we still find ourselves not maintaining them all the time. But, with regular practice, your body will habituate this healthier alignment, which will produce benefits that reach well beyond "just" stopping jaw pain. Learn more at www.OraWellness.com.

*By Will and Susan Revak
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