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## A Pain in the Neck

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Lately, my neck has been uncomfortable. It's a nagging discomfort, not all that painful, but distressing—because it won't disappear, and because it bothers me most on those rare occasions when I am sitting down, with my feet up, to read. The pain is hard to describe, and is neither pressing nor scary enough to prompt a doctor's appointment. Other things are higher on the list, relegating this to the trivial category; things to tend to someday, maybe. Ignored long enough, with luck, most such annoyances will fade away. This one, however, persists.

I've tried massage, which is expensive and seems indulgent. It also hurts—which is fine, if the pain will be beneficial. I'm on the fence about that. When the massage therapist grabs the tissue at the front of my neck, it just doesn't feel right. Who can know whether whatever things she squeezes in handfuls in my neck—tissues, glands and ropery conduits—are up to that vigorous a treatment? They're not accustomed to it.

I tried on-line research. The culprit, I discovered, is Forward Head Posture (FHP). Also known as Reduced Cervical Lordosis, FHP is one of a variety of bad habits of posture which result in neck and shoulder pain and a host of other ailments and malfunctions.

The term more commonly used is a crick in the neck, or creaking neck when it's more persistent. Mine seems somewhere between a crick and a creak. When I concentrate, I can hear my neck as it turns from side to side. It's pretty damned odd—both the act of listening to the inside of one's neck, and the sound it makes (like dried beans shaken in a stainless-steel bowl, as one stirs them to search out the mouldy and broken).

One article I found helpful follows an overview of the most common failings of posture with two simple exercises and a couple of tips to train ourselves toward greater consciousness of head and neck positioning throughout our daily activities. In a matter of minutes, I realize I've been doing a bad job of holding my head up. Who'd have thought? All these years, I've only ever reflected on how my head sits on my spine during the occasional Pilates or yoga class. Out of gym, out of mind. As of now, I am improving. (Well, maybe not right now, as—with my newfound, but faulty sensor on—I realize that my neck is leaning forward; it's preferred position, so it seems. There it is now, arching beneath my head, which tips downward toward the computer, watching these thoughts spill out on the screen. I make a correction: neck up; head back; chin down. All is good, but for how many minutes?)

From where, I wonder, will this newly developing consciousness of posture originate? Surely, I am endowed with a finite reserve of conscious attention, which feels taxed as it is. What will get pushed out, or settle back toward oblivion, to make room for this? I only started to focus

on breathing a few months ago, at a time when stresses were getting the best of me. Before re-learning how to breathe fully, slowly—I had also assumed that we learned to breathe early on in life prior, even, to mastering the holding up of the head. Giving this any thought at all, I might have reasoned that I need never look back, so to speak. Clearly that was presumptuous.

Up again: as though a string is pulling the top of my head, as one fitness instructor describes. Besides writing with a forward-positioned head, I also run that way—and probably ski, drive, read, and sit with friends to converse, too. I think of leaning forward as a sign of attentiveness, of engagement. Even (or maybe especially) when I'm being bored to tears by the story of some well-meaning but less than articulate student, I sit at the edge of my chair, leaning forward. No more. Now, I will tuck my chin slightly, hold my head high, and hope not to transmit arrogance or indifference. I'll model good habits for young people that might spare them the cricks and creaks of the old and the slumped.

Health-conscious websites encourage us to heal ourselves, and that nothing so humble as a crick or a creak could merit professional attention. I follow the maze of links, searching for additional exercises and stretches. One especially impressive resource reads like a handbook for physiotherapists and provides more guidance than I could have hoped for. All I will need is time, attention, a four-and-a-half-foot piece of doweling, and a towel. The preface is a conclusive inventory of symptoms which can result from a failure to

correct the Forward Head Posture (Healthline, 2026). Worst among them is being reduced to a permanent s-shape in old age, sometimes with a pitiful-looking hump at the top of the spine. Less dramatic, but equally motivating, are the potential benefits of drawing back the head. The list includes fewer headaches, less stress on the large intestine, reduced strain on the hips and knees, more efficient swallowing, better equilibrium from the inner ears, and improved hand-eye coordination. Who wouldn't long for those upgrades? It all makes sense, I suppose: the head is heavy, and the spine is, in every sense of the word, spindly. Shifting the weight should have repercussions from the ears to the feet. I do have headaches. I also have knee pain, and far from superlative coordination or balance. My swallowing, however, seems quite satisfactory.

I'm inclined (which I can be without leaning forward physically) to think that this is all really important information, critical to quality of life, and warrants broadcast. There's a sense of urgency in having just discovered all of this in my fifties. Maybe I should be phoning my sisters and brother to spread the word. What if we all lean? Maybe it's a family trait? Trying to picture us, I think, "Yes, we do tend to lean into life, racing forward, head first." Oh dear. Do all of our necks ache? I'll have to ask—at the risk, I know, of seeming obsessed, especially if they have somehow remained oblivious. ("Another nutty idea of your sister's," I can hear them saying to one another.)

My kids aren't ready for this, yet. Do I leave myself a dated note, and bring it up when they're

in their forties? Would they listen? (No. I can hear them, too. “Oh, Mo-o-om. I know how to hold up my head.”)

So for now, the concern about posture is mine alone. Here we go: Head up again. Feel the vertebrae loosen. Respect the body, despite its deficiencies of design, its clear impracticalities and frailties. Seize control of one’s own well-being. Do not stress about the well-being of others. Do not let discouragement cause the head to drop, or lack of vigilance give way to a sloping spine.

As for the immediate effects, yesterday, for the whole of my forty-minute run, I worked on my posture. It was challenging to attend to, while at the same time not tripping over a tree root, or taking a wrong turn, but I kept myself upright, on course, and focused exclusively on form. The sensation was of dangling from my head, as though my mind was a giant hand whose thumb and index finger closed at my temples, effectively lifting me from the ground so that only the soles of my feet made contact. I suspect that my gait was altered, although I couldn’t say how. What was certain was that I felt taller, and more alert to things happening at my new eye level.

After all of three days, I can report that every now and then—when I check—my head is actually back. Most of the time, though, it’s in its forward lean, which is discouraging. As for the crick, it might be better. The creaking? It’s still there, when I tune in to it. There’s a tender spot at the base of my neck, but the muscles at the front, to the sides of the breastbone, no longer hurt if I press them.

I will keep at it, and I'll try to remember to celebrate the day when all of this has receded into subconscious: the day when I have learned to hold up my head.

### **Reference**

Healthline. (2026). *How to fix a forward head*. <https://www.healthline.com/health/bone-health/forward-head-posture> [May 21, 2026].

### **About the Author**

Elizabeth Templeman grew up in Rockland, Maine. She now lives, writes, and works in the South Central-Interior of British Columbia. She has two books of essays, *Notes from the Interior* (Oolichan, 2003), and *Out and Back, Family in Motion* (Atmosphere, 2021). Individual essays and book reviews have appeared in various journals and anthologies. You can find more about her at: [elizabethtempleman.trubox.ca](mailto:elizabethtempleman.trubox.ca). Email: [etempleman@tru.ca](mailto:etempleman@tru.ca)