

Stand up and fight

Gravity getting you down? Stretching can help you get out of the slump, writes physiotherapist ANNA-LOUISE BOUVIER

Age has a way of sneaking up on you. As a woman, one day you realise your breasts are moving closer to your waist than your chin, your bottom is slipping towards the back of your knees and your tummy seems to have taken on lava-like qualities, spreading ever outward over your now-fashionable high-top 80s jeans.

Men suddenly find what was once a six-pack looks more like a 12-pack and that firm, proud bottom seems to have developed the consistency of a creme brulee.

But all is not lost! We can make a huge difference in how we look and feel by confronting the enemy: gravity.

Gravity pulls our bodies down and many of us give in and slump our way through life. The trouble is, if you keep slumping, eventually your ligaments (the bands that bind our bones together) get shorter and tighter and your spine gets stuck in that position.

There's an old-fashioned term, dowager's hump, which refers to the little thickened pad you see on some older ladies, poking out of the back of a round-necked floral polyester frock.

When the neck is constantly bent forward, the body builds a fat pad to try to ease the



pressure of the skin on the bone. Over time, this lump can become a hump.

Dowager's hump is no longer an issue just for older women, though. As posture messages have been lost, we've developed the tendency to slump, giving us rounder shoulders and weaker stomach muscles much earlier in life. If you look around, you'll see women in their late 30s and 40s with a posture their grandmothers didn't develop until their late 60s, if at all.

From a distance, how can you tell someone's age? If you can't see their face or skin, what is it that keys you in? It may be their shape, but more often it's the way they move and the way they hold themselves.

Much older people are stiffer; they move less freely; they often look down. If you don't keep loose and mobile, your body starts to look much older than you are.

Who would you rather look like: Elle Macpherson or Quasimodo?

AN ACTION PLAN

Stretch, stretch, stretch. And not just any stretches — specific stretches that loosen up the ribcage, lift the chest and lengthen the neck.

Stretch every day and, as you glide through the office, you'll start feeling more like a Zulu warrior queen than a harassed, exhausted, working mother ducking in to grab some last-minute shopping.

Standing tall and stretching isn't just about looking better. Opening your rib cage helps you breathe more freely, which gives you more energy; it relaxes your neck muscles, relieving some of the knots that seem to sit permanently at the base of your neck; and it gives the body a sense of calm and control rather than the hunched "flight/fright" response that stress produces in our bodies.

Many people say, "My day is already busy enough. I don't have time to exercise."



That's the great thing. You don't need to set aside specific blocks of time to do these stretches. You just need to listen to your body a little more.

WORKING IT INTO YOUR DAY

- Start your day with a few deep breaths and some great **shoulder rolls** — where else but in the shower? The steamy heat is great for your breath and, as women are the masters of multitasking, this is a great way to get two things out of the way at once.
- When you feel a little achy as you stand over the sink organising today's lunches and dinner while pre-cooking for 20 of your closest friends who are bringing themselves and their families for lunch on the weekend — do the **sink stretch**.
- When your neck is getting tense after a few hours at the computer or perhaps after a few hours ironing — try the **chest releasing stretches**. When you've been sitting reading books with kids and helping with homework, stand up and **stretch your spine** before you go to the next part of your day.
- At the end of the day, take five minutes to do the **relax and release stretch**, so that when you go to bed your body has

released all the tension the day has generated.

In a nutshell, stretch up, stand tall, feel great and stop life pulling you down and hunching you over.

1 SHOULDER ROLLS

Release neck tension

Gently roll your shoulders backwards, keeping your waist still and your breath slow and even.

2 SINK STRETCH

Open the chest, lengthen the spine

Gripping the sink, move your weight backwards towards your bottom, with the pressure in your heels.

3 BACK STRETCH

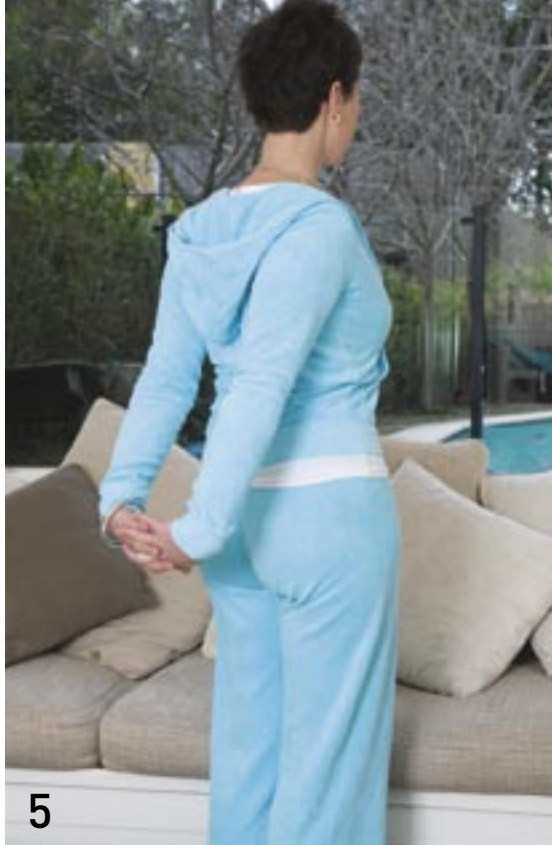
Release neck and ease back tension

Interlock your arms, breathe out as you lean back over the chair. Try not to let your back over-arch.

4 NECK RELEASER

Release neck, shoulders and back tension

Gently breathe out, moving your "turning" breast, arm and shoulder towards the floor. Keep your chin slightly tucked. ➤



5 CHEST OPENER

Lift the chest, lengthen the neck

Breathe out, taking your hands down and away from your body. Don't let your shoulders lift or your back arch.

6 END OF THE DAY RELAX AND RELEASE

Turn off muscle tension, open the body

Place a lounge cushion between the base of your neck and your waist. Keep your chin tucked, knees bent and relax. If your neck aches, place a small rolled towel underneath it to support it. If your shoulders start to ache, release them and put them by your side. ■