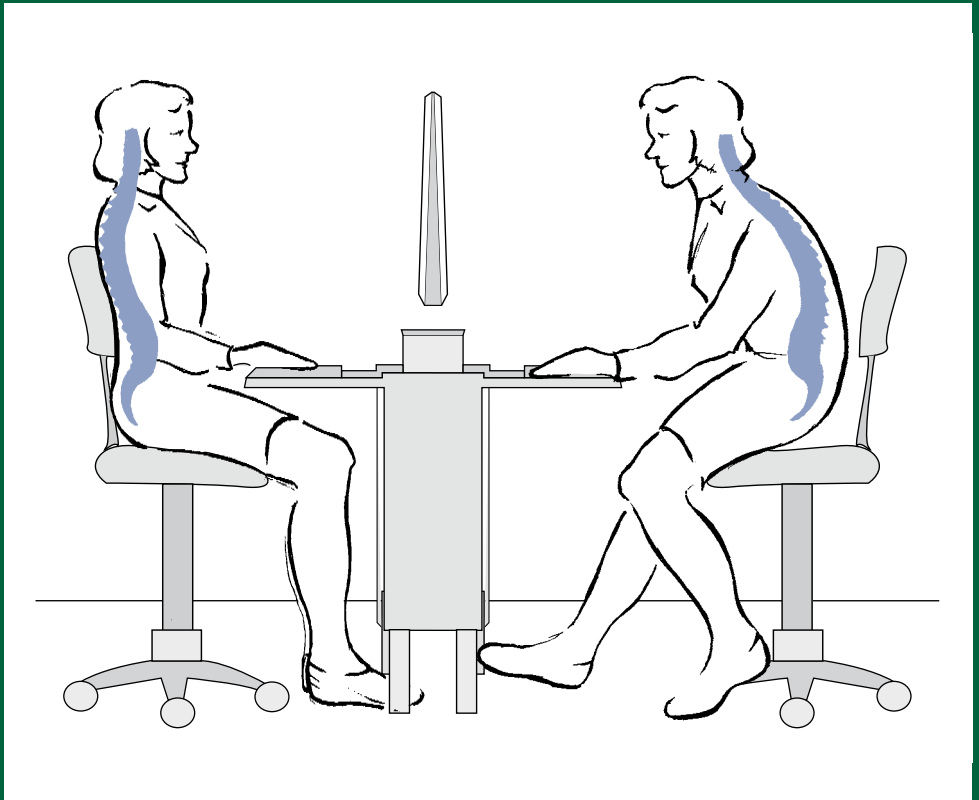


Posture notes

Advice to help prevent or alleviate
back problems



by Michelle Olorunda
October 2006





The Arthritic Association is a registered charity dedicated to helping relieve people from the pain of arthritis, through natural methods, based on a Home Treatment Programme. Developed by Charles de Coti-Marsh 60 years ago, the Home Treatment Programme centres on managing what you eat, as well as taking a number of natural supplements, which over time help to loosen cramped muscles and painful joints.

For a £6 annual subscription, Members are given full instructions on how to follow the Home Treatment Programme and individual, one-to-one guidance from your own Adviser is available via our Freephone Helpline.

Home Treatment Advisory Team:

Bruce Hester
Siwan Leach
Elizabeth Williams

The Arthritic Association

One Upperton Gardens
Eastbourne, East Sussex
BN21 2AA

Freephone Helpline:

0800 652 3188

Email:

info@arthriticassociation.org.uk

Web:

www.arthriticassociation.org.uk

Written by Michelle Olorunda MSc, BSc, MCSP, RPT

Reviewed by Dr Raija Kuisma PhD, MSc, MCSP, RPT
Senior Lecturer the School of Health Professions, University of Brighton

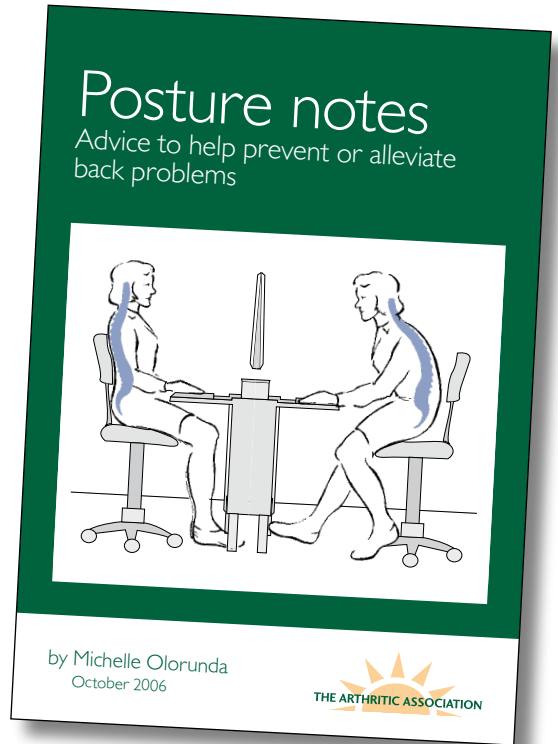
Illustrations by Geoff Sharkey

Email: geoff@sharkey.com

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Posture

Good posture is the body's way of adopting a position in which a person can function effectively and efficiently without putting undue stress on the body. Posture is any position we adopt such as sitting, standing, lying and walking.

The ideal posture in standing when observed from the side is when the earlobe, tip of the shoulder, hip joint, knee joint and ankle joint are all lined up around an imaginary line. When viewed from the back or the front, the shoulders and hips should be level with each other and the spine is in a straight line. However most people have some deviation from the ideal line and these small variations are considered normal.

Some people may have rounded shoulders or back, poking chin or exaggerated curves in the spine. Others may lean backwards when standing still or they walk with their knees constantly bent. Incorrect posture can cause pain and lead to arthritic changes in the joints, muscle weakness and tightness. Ensuring that you adopt the ideal posture every day will prevent unnecessary strain being placed on inflamed and sore joints.



The straight line through the body indicates the line of correct alignment

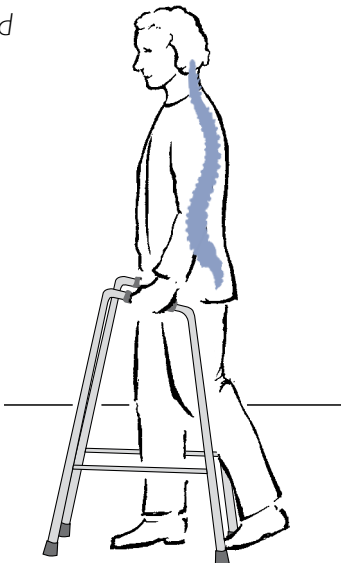
Standing and walking

When standing, think of a piece of string pulling you upwards from your head towards the ceiling. Ensure that your shoulders are rolled back, knees are straight but not locked and your feet are a shoulder-width apart. If you find this difficult, try standing with your back against a wall.

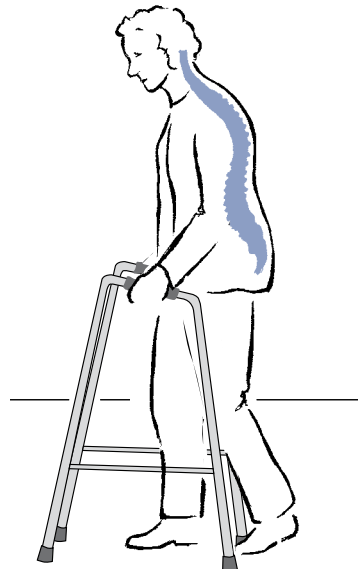
When walking, stand up tall as described above. Take comfortable, even strides remembering to hold your head up. If you walk with a stick or zimmer frame, remember to maintain your posture and not hunch over your zimmer frame. It is essential that your stick or zimmer frame is the right height for you.

To check this, stand up straight and hold on to your frame or something sturdy like a table or large chair. Relax your dominant hand loosely by your side. Ensure your shoulders are relaxed and your elbow slightly bent. Now see if your stick or zimmer frame is level with your wrist. You may find this easier to do in front of a mirror. If your frame or stick is too tall or too short for you, return it to the person who issued it to you so they can adjust it. Alternatively you can get in touch with your local physiotherapist or occupational therapist who can help adjust it for you (see the page 12 for details).

Good



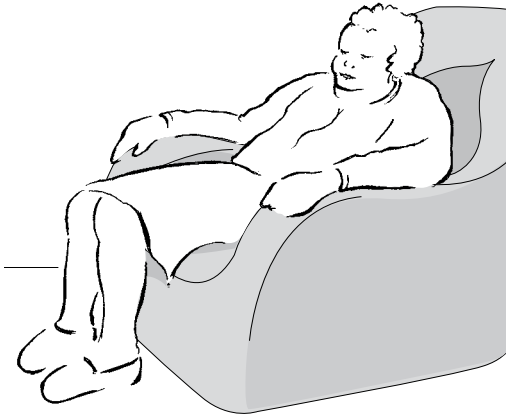
Bad



Upright posture when using a zimmer frame

Sitting

Good posture is essential for people who have arthritis as they often experience painful muscle spasms and pain due to the inflammation of their back, hip and knees. Because of this pain people may sit or lie down for hours as pain prevents them from performing their normal daily activities. Sitting for long periods of time in a soft chair allows the body to slump down into the chair. Poor posture is then adopted over a period of time. This can lead to stretching of the muscles and ligaments in the back and cause further pain and stiffness in the joints, leading to a vicious circle.



Poor posture in a sofa chair

If you have arthritis or other joint problems, a good comfortable and supportive chair will help you to adopt the ideal posture. Sitting in the wrong chair can cause pain and stiffness. It can also make it difficult for you when you try to stand up. You may experience more pain when trying to stand up from an unsuitable chair, as you will need to use more effort.

A way to find a good sitting position is firstly to sit upright in a suitable chair like the one pictured on the next page. Sofas are usually too soft and low and this can encourage you to slump. A firm armchair, which is high enough, has an upright back support and is steady, is essential in helping you adopt the ideal posture.

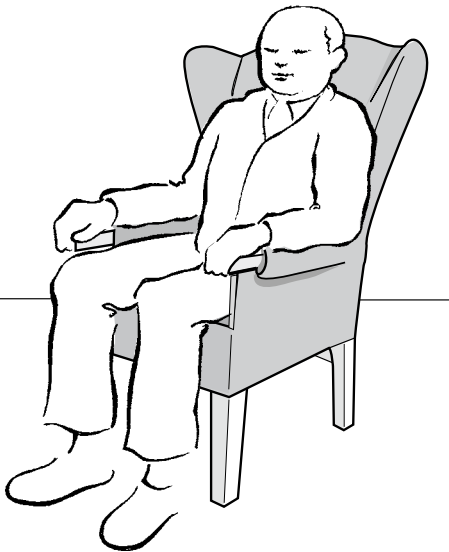
When sitting in a suitable chair:

- Make sure both your feet are placed firmly on the ground, with your hips and knees placed approximately at a 90° angle and your back resting comfortably against the back rest.
- Make sure your bottom touches the back of the chair, but at the same time you do not feel pressure behind your knees.

Improvements in posture can help alleviate pain associated with stiff and strained joints and muscles. You will feel better and have a greater sense of well-being.

- Your shoulders should touch the back of the chair comfortably. The arm rests should support your forearms without raising your shoulders.

Having found a good position, you will get a sense of being in the mid-position – this is your neutral position and you will need to find this each time you sit down.



Ideal posture in an arm chair

At first this position may feel strange, especially if you are used to sitting in a poor position, and you may become tired. This is normal as your body is not used to sitting in this way, but keep practising and soon you will find it comfortable, and your joint pains and muscle aches may reduce. After a while it will become automatic and you will not have to find the correct position every time you sit down.

If your chair is too low, you may sit on a firm cushion so that it is easier to stand up. If your chair is too high and your feet do not touch the floor when you sit back, use a steady stool or box under your feet. Be sure to push the stool or box away under the chair before you go to stand up. You can also do your exercises in this position; see details later in this booklet.

Working in a seated or standing position

Be aware of your posture when sitting at your desk. Ensure your work station is set up to help you sit properly.

- When working at a computer, sit squarely facing your computer screen.
- Adjust your chair so it is the right height for you.
- Your hips and knees should be approximately at 90° angles with your feet firmly on the ground.
- Your computer screen should be at the level of and directly in front of your eyes so that you do not need to tilt your head. You should sit close to your desk so that you can reach your keyboard and mouse without stretching or hunching your shoulders.
- Use a lumbar roll to support the arch of your lower back if necessary.
- Stretch and change position frequently while you are working.

Good



Bad



Sitting at a desk with the chair adjusted to the right height

If you sit at a desk to do paperwork or other jobs, try using a sloped writing board to help raise the surface you are working on. This will ensure that you do not strain your neck when you tilt your head when looking down at your work. Follow the steps above to ensure you assume the correct posture when working in a seated position.

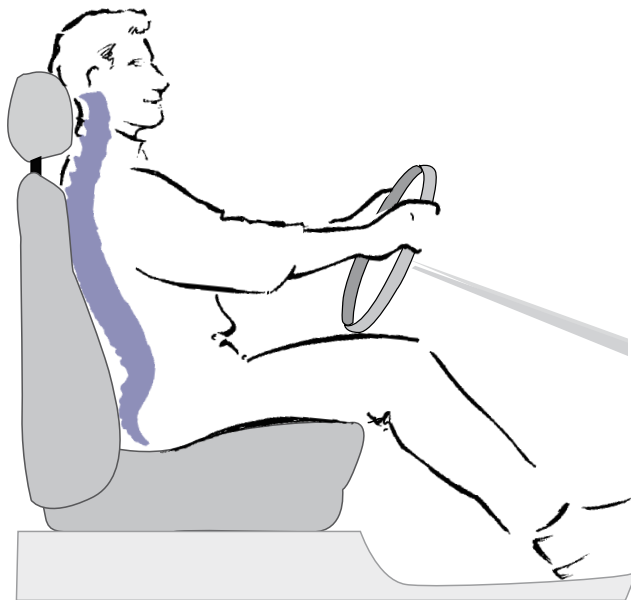
It is also important to maintain good posture while working in a standing position.

- When standing, think of a piece of string pulling you upwards from your head towards the ceiling.
- Ensure that your shoulders are rolled back, knees are straight but not locked and your feet are a shoulder-width apart.

- Stand close to your work space and avoid stretching to reach your equipment or work space.
- If your job requires you to do the same task repetitively, for example a painter and decorator, stretch and change position frequently while you are working.
- Have frequent rest breaks by walking around or sitting down for a few minutes rather than standing in the same position for long periods of time.

Visit www.backcare.org.uk for specific exercises for your back.

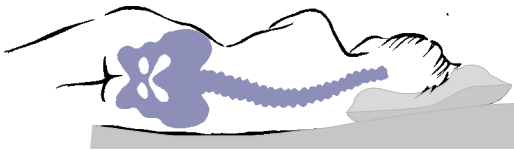
Posture while driving



- Ensure you sit up straight; use a lumbar roll in the arch of your lower back for support if necessary.
- Move your seat close to the steering wheel so that your back is supported and your shoulders are relaxed back; your elbows should be slightly bent.
- Your seat should be close enough so that your knees remain slightly bent and can easily reach the pedals.
- Adjust your seat every time before you start off, if somebody else has been using your car.
- Remember, the chair is adjustable: try different angles of the back rest, the height of the seat and the closeness to the steering wheel to find the position most comfortable for you. Certain models allow you to adjust the steering wheel to a height and closeness that is comfortable for you. A comfortable position makes your driving easier and safer, and reduces pain.
- On long journeys, remember to have frequent rest breaks so that you can change position and stretch.

Sleeping

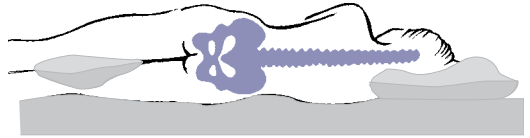
When sleeping, try to find the most comfortable position for you. Sleeping on your back or side is better than sleeping on your stomach. Check the firmness of your mattress as this too is important for your back. If the mattress is too soft, your body will sink into it and adopt a poor posture without support. If it is too hard you will not feel comfortable and this may affect your sleep.



This bed is too soft. Notice the alignment of the spine is in the shape of a hammock.

Use pillows between your knees or under your knees to take the strain off your back. If you have arthritis in your neck, try not to sleep on your stomach as this overextends your neck. Use a urethane or down pillow for neck support, taking the strain off your neck. You should also use pillows of a medium thickness to support your neck. If you use too thick a pillow or more than one pillow, your neck muscles can become strained, as this will bend

your head forward into a poor position. If your pillow is too flat, this can also cause poor posture, as your neck will not be in alignment with your back.



You should aim for a firm, supportive mattress like the one above

Lie on your back and slide your hand (palm down) into the small of your back. If there is a large gap, the mattress is probably too hard. If you have to squeeze your hand in, then it is probably too soft. If your hand slides in fairly easily, the mattress is probably just right.

Support of the spine

Sometimes poor posture is adopted when muscles are weak due to lack of exercise. Exercise is very important in managing the symptoms of arthritis.

See our booklet *Moving with Arthritis* on how to exercise to manage your arthritis.

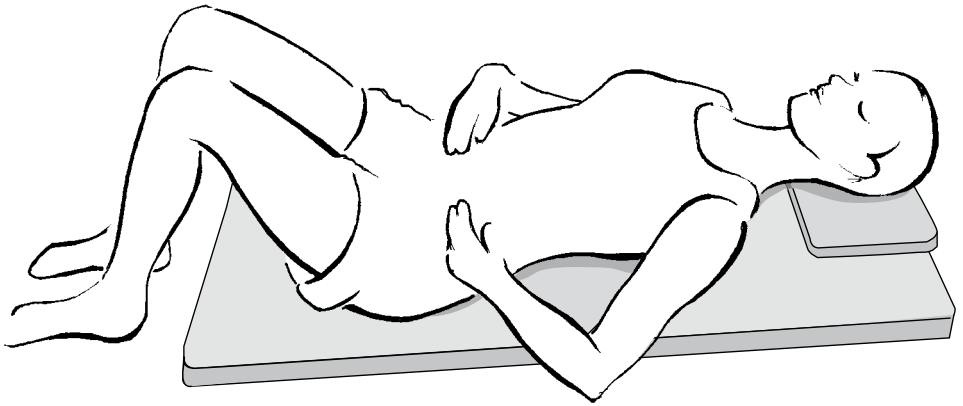
Muscles around the abdomen are especially prone to becoming weak. There is a large muscle called the transverse abdominal (TA) muscle that sits underneath the main abdominal muscles that you use when doing a sit up. This muscle acts as a corset to support your spine when you carry out activities such as walking, washing the dishes or shopping. During these activities, less strain and stress is placed on the small ligaments, muscles and joints of the spine.

When the TA muscle is weak it does not support the spine properly. This can lead to back pain when carrying out your daily activities. For patients with arthritis it is a good idea to train this muscle to keep it active and help you with your posture. As a result of arthritis, degeneration of the spine can occur and can lead to weakening

of the joints, muscles and ligaments. Therefore, the structure of the spine can be easily damaged from excess stress and strain. This can lead to the spine becoming unstable. Strengthening your TA muscle can also help compensate for weakness of the spine that may be a result of arthritis.

Your TA muscle can be exercised in any position. The following paragraph explains how:

- Lie on your back on the floor, or on your bed if you have difficulty lying on the floor.
- Bend your legs while keeping your feet on the floor or bed.
- Place your hands on your hips and feel for the bony parts at the front of your abdomen. **This is part of your pelvic bone.**
- Place your index and middle fingers just inside of your pelvic bone on both sides.
- If you cough or laugh you should feel that your transverse abdominal muscle becomes hard under your fingers.

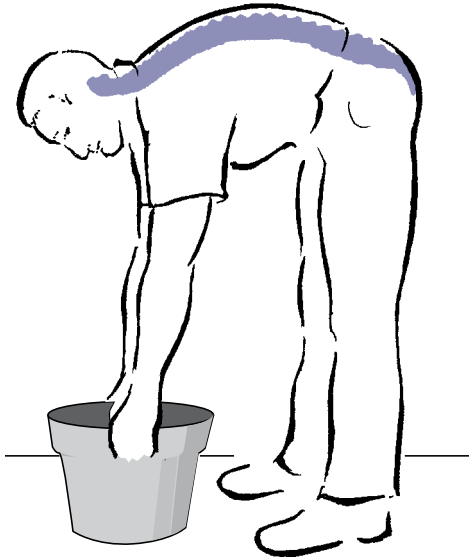


- Now flatten your back against the bed or floor, draw your belly button towards your back and contract your lower abdominal muscles as though you were trying to stop yourself from going to the toilet.
- **You should not hold your breath while doing this exercise. Breathe out when you contract your TA muscle, then breathe in when you relax.**
- Practise holding the contraction for a couple of seconds and then build up to 10 seconds.
- Repeat this exercise 5–10 times. The best time to do this exercise is in the morning before you get up and again in the evening when you go to bed.

Once you have mastered this exercise in a lying position, you can then practise the same exercise in a seated or standing position. Always find your neutral position first before carrying out this exercise and don't forget to keep breathing in a relaxed manner.

Lifting and carrying

- Wherever possible, avoid lifting and carrying as these can cause back pain.
- If you do have to lift something, **bend your knees, not your back!**
- Keep your feet wide apart to help you feel stable. In this way, you are using your strong leg muscles and not straining your back.
- Carry the object against your body.
- Bend at your knees when putting the object down.



Out and about Gardening

When out shopping, use the tall, waist-high, shallow-sided shopping trolleys that many stores now offer, instead of carrying heavy items in a basket. For the journey home, if you do not drive, a rucksack, used over both shoulders, is useful for carrying tins, bottles and other heavy items, leaving your arms free for lighter goods like cereals. Pack goods into several bags, carrying some in each hand, so that your load is balanced evenly on each side. Alternatively, you could use a four-wheeled shopping cart that can be pushed, thus reducing the work of having to pull a heavy trolleybag.

If you carry a bag to work, try to use a rucksack so that you can distribute the weight evenly when you put both straps over both your shoulders. Try not to use single-strap bags as this can make you lean to one side and cause pain.

If you must use a single-strap bag, try to carry as little as possible, only taking the necessary items you need that day, and leaving any unnecessary items at home or at work in a locker. When using a single-strap bag, place the strap across your body so that the weight of the bag is on the opposite side of the body to the shoulder on which you have placed the strap.

Gardening can be particularly harmful as it involves working on the ground.

- Split the gardening jobs up into short sessions over a number of days so you are working for short durations and not trying to complete one big job in a day.
- Invest in some long handled secateurs to reach plants and bushes that are beyond normal reach.
- Use a stool to sit on, rather than bending or kneeling.
- Take regular rest breaks.

Visit www.backcare.org.uk or www.chiropractic-uk.co.uk for more hints and tips to avoid injury.

Further help

If you have difficulty following these guidelines for maintaining good posture or in finding the correct furniture, you can obtain advice from an Associated Practitioner such as a Chartered Physiotherapist, Massage Therapist or Alexander Technique Teacher. Contact The Arthritic Association on our **Freephone helpline 0800 652 3188** for details of an Associated Practitioner in your area.

Occupational therapist

Speaking to an occupational therapist can give you ideas on energy-saving tips and equipment/furniture aids that can help improve your posture and make daily activities more manageable .

Podiatrist/chiroprapist

It is commonly known that poor posture can often stem from problems with your feet. If you have trouble with your feet it may be worthwhile seeking advice from a podiatrist or chiroprapist. Poorly fitting shoes and high heels can also be the cause of poor posture, so always wear shoes that are

comfortable. High-heeled shoes should only be worn occasionally.

Your GP can refer you to a state-registered physiotherapist, occupational therapist or podiatrist/chiroprapist, or you can look for the number of your local hospital or social services in the telephone directory and ask for the relevant department. Alternatively, you can see a therapist privately; see below for details. Your local gym should be able to direct you to an Alexander Technique teacher, yoga or pilates instructor who can give you advice on good posture.

How do I know if an occupational therapist, physiotherapist or podiatrist/chiroprapist is registered or not?

The Health Professions Council maintains an online register which includes Physiotherapists, Occupational Therapists and Chiroprapists/Podiatrists at www.hpc-uk.org

So remember, good posture prevents strains and pains!

Professional bodies

British Association/College of Occupational Therapists

106–114 Borough High Street,
Southwark, London SE1 1LB
Telephone: 020 7357 6480
Web: www.cot.org.uk

For an independent occupational therapist:

Freephone: 0800 389 4873
Web: www.otip.co.uk/index.htm

The British Chiropractic Association

59 Castle Street, Reading, Berkshire
RG1 7SN
Telephone: 0118 950 5950
Web: www.chiropractic-uk.co.uk

The Chartered Society of Physiotherapy

14 Bedrow Road, London WC1R 4ED
Telephone: 020 7306 6666
Web: www.csp.org.uk

The Society for Chiropractors and Podiatrists

Head Office, 1 Fellmonger's Path,
Tower Bridge Road, London SE1 3LY
Telephone: 020 7234 8620
Web: www.feetforlife.org

The Arthritic Association

One Upperton Gardens
Eastbourne, East Sussex
BN21 2AA

Freephone: 0800 652 3188

E-mail: info@arthriticassociation.org.uk

Web: www.arthriticassociation.org.uk

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Disclaimer

This guide is not intended as a substitute for the medical advice given by a General Practitioner or other health care professional.

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