

OSTEOPATHY AND DRIVING

Driving can be a major cause of aches and pains due largely to being in a fixed, possibly poor seating position, often for long periods. This is frequently compounded by the stress associated with driving. Passengers can also be affected in a similar way.

Symptoms associated with driving posture include:

- Neck pain
- Headaches
- Eyestrain
- Shoulder pain
- Elbow and wrist pain
- Back pain
- Hip and knee pain
- Foot and ankle pain

CHOOSING YOUR CAR

Choose a car with an adjustable lumbar (back) support and use it. Alternatively, keep a flat cushion in the car to place in the small of your back if necessary. Depressing the clutch increases the pressure on your back, so ensure you can depress the clutch without overstretching, or consider an automatic car. Power steering also significantly reduces the load on the spine. Once you are sure the seat is comfortable, check that all the driving controls are within easy reach.

Over a period of time, certain car designs may have a negative effect on posture. The main points to check and avoid are:

Steering wheel offset: The steering wheel is not positioned directly in front of the driver as it should be but to the left; steering wheels can also be slightly rotated. Either of these layouts are likely to cause the driver to twist their upper back and shoulder girdle to compensate, producing long term strain.

Pedal offset: This is mainly found in small cars, though less commonly now. The pedals are positioned towards the centre of the car, rather than in line with the driver. This causes the driver to twist their right leg to reach the accelerator.

Insufficient headroom: To allow for the lack of headroom drivers tend to slouch in the seat and put strain on the lower back and legs. A sun roof can aggravate the problem.

CHECK IF A CAR IS SUITABLE FOR YOU

1. **The Praying Test** - Sitting in the driver's seat place both hands together, pointing forwards as if praying, with the wrists touching your chest. If the steering wheel is not offset you should be pointing straight at the centre of the wheel.
2. **The Look Down Test** - With both hands placed evenly on the steering wheel, look down at the legs. It should be possible to see equal amounts of each leg between your arms. Frequently the left leg will be visible but the right leg will be obscured by the right arm which may indicate that the shoulder girdle is rotated to the left in relation to the pelvis.

3. **The Right Leg Test** - This test should be performed after driving the car for a short while. Once again, look down and examine the position of the right leg. Is it elevated above the level of the left or has it fallen out towards the edge of the seat? Is the right foot roughly in line with the thigh as it should be, or has it had to come across towards the centre of the car?
4. **The Fist Test** - With the seat in the normal driving position make a fist with left hand. Ideally it should be possible to place the fist on the crown of the head. If it is only possible to insert the flat of the hand between the roof and the head, there is insufficient headroom.
5. **The Kerb Height Test** - Swing your right leg out of the car as though getting out. Place your foot on the ground with the lower leg in a vertical position. Your thigh should be sloping down toward the knee. If it is sloping upwards you will have difficulty getting out of the car, placing stress on the spine.

TIPS FOR DRIVERS AND PASSENGERS

Keep your seat reasonably upright, leaning backwards only at a slight angle. Sit with arms gently bent at the elbow and don't lean forward out of the seat. To relax, raise your shoulders to your ears, breathe in then lower them as you breathe out. You may want to do this at every red traffic light or when stationary.

Adjust the head restraint so that the centre of it is level with your eyes. Don't set the head restraint too low as this can allow more serious injury in an accident. Ensure your seat belt is properly adjusted.

When getting in, sit first, then swing your legs into the car. When you get out, move the seat back before swinging your legs out.

Do you 'ride the clutch', resting your foot in the air? No wonder your ankles or calf muscles hurt.

Avoid reaching behind to get bags from the rear seat. This risks overstretching and injuring your shoulder or lower back. Get out and open the door.

Be careful when loading and unloading. Lift correctly and get help with items you may not manage alone because of either the weight or the shape. Avoid overstretching into the car to retrieve items.

Movement is the key for both driver and passenger. Stop regularly, ideally once an hour, especially when feeling tired. Get out of your vehicle and walk around it several times. Gently move your body side to side and gently twist to each side. While sitting in the car gently roll and shrug your shoulders to relax them, raise your shoulders towards your ears, push them back against the seat then relax them down. Repeat 3-4 times.

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