

Stop Sciatica Now

revised edition

Help Yourself

Eliminate Back and Leg Pain



By Pamela Kihm



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PainFreeChoices®

P.O. Box 7078, Evanston, IL 60204-7078

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Foreword

For years I have suffered from sciatica, spinal stenosis, arthritis, and assorted other physical problems. I was treated by numerous doctors and physical therapists over the years, without much relief. And then, suddenly - there was Pamela!

Pamela Kihm opened up a whole new world of wellness to me, the world of Feldenkrais! I leave it to Pamela to describe the Feldenkrais Method®, but since you are reading this, I think you can thank your lucky stars that you are holding in your hands one of Pamela's books on how to be pain free from sciatica, as well as looking forward to her other books to come.

May Ruth Spitzer

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Reorganize Skeletally

Sciatica is not a disease but a collection of symptoms frequently resulting from a less than ideal use of your body. Your pain is telling you to do something differently so you don't keep hurting yourself.

Don't ignore your pain. You know how pain shouts at you to pull your hand away from that hot stove. If you listen, even a small amount of discomfort tells you, "Position your body differently! Move in a different way!"

Gain and Maintain Posture From The Bottom Up

There's an easier, more comfortable way to gain and maintain your posture than tightening your upper body and lower back. Think of your body as skeletally engineered. What's below is meant to support what's above. This is the opposite of maintaining your posture from the top down.

Example of posture from the top down

- 1 Sit in a chair with a firm seat.
- 2 Slouch the way you would at the computer or watching TV.
- 3 Use your muscles to pull your shoulders back (the way many people try to effect better posture).

Is your head still forward, even though you pulled your shoulders back?

Does this make your neck uncomfortable? (If you stay this way, you invite neck and shoulder problems as well as lower back problems.)

Can you use your arms freely and efficiently when you pull your shoulders back to stay upright?

- 4 With your shoulders still pulled back, use your muscles to pull your head back over your body so that you *look* like you are “in good posture.”

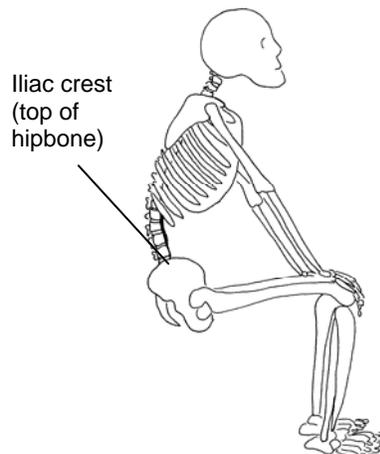
How comfortable is this?

Could you maintain this position for long without hurting?

Is your lower back *still* in a slouch even though you’ve pulled your upper body upward and backward?

Can you feel how hard your lower back muscles are working to help your upper body?

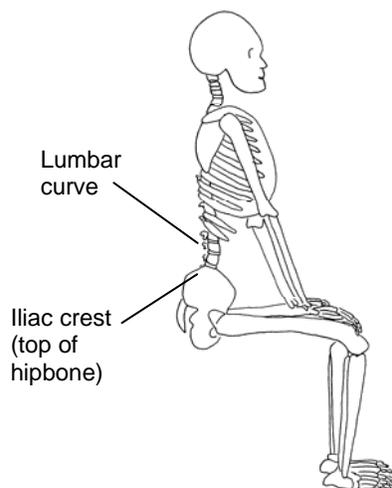
Example of gaining and maintaining posture from the bottom up



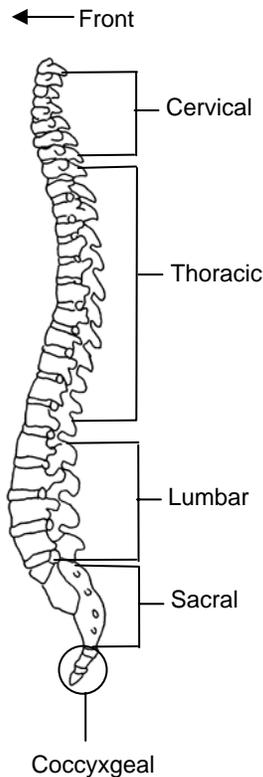
- 1 Return to your starting position. That is, sit on a chair with a firm seat and slouch the way you did at the beginning of the experiment.
- 2 Put your hands on your iliac crests (the tops of your hipbones). Notice that when you slouch, the iliac crests tilt behind you.

The more you slouch, the further back your iliac crests tilt.

- 3 Rotate the top of your pelvis forward until your iliac crests point toward the ceiling instead of behind you.



- Did this take you into upright posture with less effort?
- Did you notice that your body moved into this upright posture without your shoulder muscles having to tense?
- Did your pelvis bring your head up over your body without your having to tense your neck muscles?
- Are you now taller than a moment ago?



It's important to remember that your spine is a continuum, from the tip end of your coccyx (tailbone), through the sacrum (center back of your pelvis), to the top of your neck. Your pelvis is a powerful “handle” that you can use to effortlessly rearrange your whole spine to make your back, neck, and shoulders more comfortable.

Notice the spinal curves, including the lumbar curve, in a healthfully positioned spine. ***We are meant to have those spinal curves.*** Continually canceling out your lumbar curve can set you up for disc problems as well as sciatica.

Finding your most healthful posture

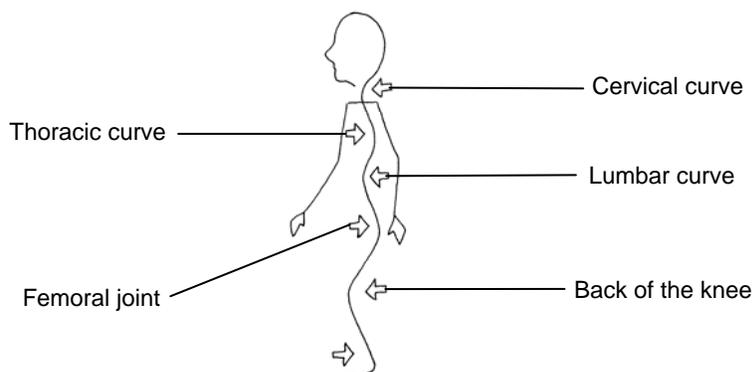
Moshe Feldenkrais had a profoundly simple way to help people find their most healthful posture when standing. He said, “*Pretend* you’re about to jump up in the air.” You don’t have to *actually* jump—just move into position *as if to* jump. The changes in body-position that you have to make in order to jump are the exact changes needed for more comfortable and efficient standing and walking!

- If you’re slouching, could you jump very high?
- If you kept your back positioned as if it were flattened against a wall, could you jump upward?
- If you kept your coccyx tucked under, could you jump upward?
- If you didn’t allow some flexibility in your hip joints or your knees, could you jump?
- If your feet were wide apart and your knees were hyper-extended (too straight) could you jump upward?

All of the above prevents one from jumping upward; any of the above, if habitual, could irritate your sciatic nerve network.

The “jump” technique is very individual. Wherever you need to fold in order to jump is exactly where you need to let go of muscular rigidity to stop irritating your sciatic nerves.

In order to spring upward, a person has to “accordion pleat.” You cannot accordion pleat through your femoral joints (where your leg meets your pelvis) if your coccyx is tucked under.



“Accordion pleating” is a technique to remind you where you need to eliminate rigidity in order to have good posture *and* be comfortable. You don’t have to stand and walk with your knees dramatically bent, however to keep sciatica at bay you do need to allow flexible bend-ability in your hip joints and knees.

When you first stand up, momentarily “accordion pleat” a little bit as if to jump, then softly lift up out of that without going all the way into old habits of coccyx tucking, back flattening, or knees hyper-extending.

Any time you feel discomfort while standing, momentarily “accordion pleat.” Then, softly lift up through both your sternum and your sacrum so both the front and the back of your spine lengthen *without losing your natural cervical, thoracic, and lumbar curves and the springiness in your hip, knee, and ankle joints.*

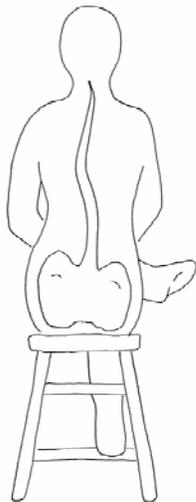
“Acture”

Moshe Feldenkrais didn’t like to use the word posture. To him “posture” sounded statue-like—only useful when posing for a portrait. Instead, Dr. Feldenkrais coined the word “acture.” In acture, the person is prepared for action. Moshe said that one is standing in acture when he or she doesn’t have to make any adjustment before walking forward, backward, or to the side. The standing position that results from briefly accordion pleating or thinking, “jump,” is a perfect example of acture.

Sitting with one leg crossed over the other is *not* acture

You have to uncross your legs before standing.

Your pelvis tilts when one leg crosses the other. (If flexibility in your hip joints allows the crossed leg to be parallel to the floor your pelvis doesn't have to tilt as much, but you're still creating a challenge for vulnerable sciatic nerves.)



When your pelvis tilts, it draws your spine into temporary scoliosis:

Your lumbar vertebrae in your lower spine curve sideways following your pelvis, and

Your vertebrae in your upper spine curve sideways in the opposite direction so that your head can remain upright.

Habitually sitting with the same leg crossed for long periods of time can irritate your sciatic nerves (and also cause blood circulation problems in your legs). Remember, part of the sciatic nerve network passes through the back of each knee.

Videotape is available from the Feldenkrais Guild office, which shows Moshe Feldenkrais being interviewed on TV. He was close to 80 years old, overweight, sitting in a thickly upholstered chair, and had a past history of very painful knees. In spite of all that, he demonstrated how he could stand up smoothly and quickly—because he had been sitting in acture with his feet solid on the floor.

Foot Placement Is Important While Sitting

When you sit, the placement of your feet influences how hard the muscles in your back must work to keep you upright.

Let's experiment so you can discover if this statement is true.

- 1 Sit forward enough on your chair so that your back (from your shoulders down through the back of your pelvis) is not touching the back of the chair.

- 2 Place your feet flat on the floor a comfortable distance apart, and bring yourself into your most comfortable posture.
- 3 Now, move your feet into a position where they are not flat on the floor. (For example, cross your ankles.)

Did the change of foot position take you into a little bit of a slouch?

If you were able to maintain your posture, did your back muscles have to work harder than when your feet were flat on the floor?

- 4 To verify if your foot position affects how hard your back must work to maintain your posture, slowly alternate between having your feet flat on the floor and not having one foot make firm contact with the floor.

Foot Placement Is Important When Standing

The position of your feet influences the position of your pelvis, and consequently, the comfort of your sciatic nerves as they thread from your lower lumbar vertebrae, through the back of your pelvis, and down your legs.

Standing with feet wide apart (military stance) tends to hyperextend knees. When your knees hyperextend, the knee joints actually bend backward beyond neutral. That's not healthful for either your knees or sensitive sciatic nerves.

If you stand with your feet wide apart and your knees hyperextended, your pelvis will either --

Tilt so that your coccyx tucks under (eliminating your lumbar curve), or

Tilt the opposite way (exaggerating your lumbar curve)

A more healthful option

Standing with one foot a little bit forward and one foot a little bit backward –

Encourages your pelvis to position your spine so that your lumbar curve is healthfully in place.

Enables you to shift your weight a bit forward or backward to help your back and legs be comfortable.



Foot Placement When Bending Over

Your back and sciatic nerves will be more comfortable any time you have to bend over if you place one foot back a little to help you maintain a lumbar curve. You want to lengthen your spine not round it into a slouch. You need your coccyx (tail bone) released and your sternum (breastbone) facing forward not downward. This is true *every time* you bend over—even if just bending over a little bit—washing your face, making the bed, adjusting the TV, etc.

Therapy While You Sleep

No mattress—no matter how firm—can keep your whole spine absolutely straight. To keep your spine “straight” you’d have to do the work, and that muscular tightening would make you less comfortable, not more comfortable. (Don’t do it!) Hopefully, after you fell asleep, your body would have the wisdom to let some of that excessive muscle tension go.

When you relax while lying on your side, your spine gives in to gravity, curving a bit toward the ground. The softer the surface, the bigger the curve, but even when you lie on a hard floor, gravity draws your spine into a curve. Instead of tensing to try to keep your spine straight, use this gravity-induced curve for self-therapy.

The following therapeutic lesson utilizes gravity and your breathing to gently and subtly undulate your spine, thus improving circulation through your back and down through your legs.

Equipment needed: Two pillows, one for under your head, one for your legs, and a comfortable place to lie down

- 1 Lie on whichever side is the most comfortable for you.
- 2 Bend your knees to the degree that's comfortable for you. Then place a pillow between your legs *from your knees down to your toes*.

Note: Be sure that your bottom shoulder is under, not on top of, the pillow. You just want to support your neck without creating more of a challenge for your spine.



- 3 *For a brief moment*, try to keep your spine as straight as a stick, parallel to the floor.

Sense if that makes your back less, instead of more, comfortable. Can you breathe very easily when you do that?

Let that go!

- 4 Exaggerate your exhalation several times, allowing your inhalation to just naturally follow.

As you exhale, the side of your rib basket nearest the ceiling can fold or “cave-in.” Because your spine connects to your ribs, this subtly relaxes your spine a bit more toward the floor in a gentle curve.

As you inhale, that upper side of your rib basket stops “caving in” and lifts your spine.

It's the gentle undulation of the whole length of your spine, down into the deeper curve and back up, that's therapeutic—so don't fight it by tensing or guarding any part of your body. Don't even tense your jaw!

- 5 Each time you inhale; allow your back to widen. Your lungs are like balloons. They don't just expand forward but also out to the sides and into your back.

This relaxes your whole back all the way down through your pelvis, where your sciatic nerves thread to reach each leg.

You will eventually find that your lower back can expand a bit with each inhalation. When you really relax you may even feel movement under your coccyx.

Note: If you choose to sleep on your back, place a folded pillow under your knees and make sure the pillow under your head is not too high.

4

Gentle Exercises to Reduce Pain

This chapter teaches you a variety of ways to be your own therapist whether you're at home, in the office, or traveling. These techniques will help you calm overactive muscles and sciatica pain.

Sitting Inch Worm

Many people, with chronic lower back and leg pain, tense both the front and the back of their bodies excessively. Contracting or tensing a muscle shortens it.

This exercise allows the muscles along both the front and the back of your spine to lengthen and relax.

- 1 Sit toward the edge of your bed, or on a chair, with your feet flat on the ground and your hands resting on your thighs.
- 2 Move your feet a little bit farther apart than usual and allow the same amount of space between your knees as between your feet.
- 3 Make sure your pelvis is supporting your spine (page 14 Posture From The Bottom Up) so that your sternum (breastbone) and your face are looking straight forward.
- 4 Without slouching, bend forward through your femoral (hip) joints.

As you bend forward allow your coccyx (tail bone) to release— i.e. you're still sitting on the chair, but your coccyx no longer makes contact with the chair.

As you bend forward allow your abdominal muscles to lengthen, not contract, so that your sternum can remain facing forward, not down toward the floor.

- 5 To return to your original upright position:
 - Sink your sternum a little bit so it tilts toward your knees—as you sink your sternum, your spine will round into a little bit of a slouch, your head will sink forward, and your iliac crests (top of your hip bones) will tilt backward a bit.
 - Then, reposition your pelvis so that your iliac crests are facing toward the ceiling (see page 14) and the vertebrae of your spine can stack up like “building blocks” from the bottom up.
 - The neck end of your spine and your head will passively be the last to come up.
- 6 Slowly alternate between #4 (bend forward through your hip joints) and #5 (stack your spine like building blocks from the bottom up).

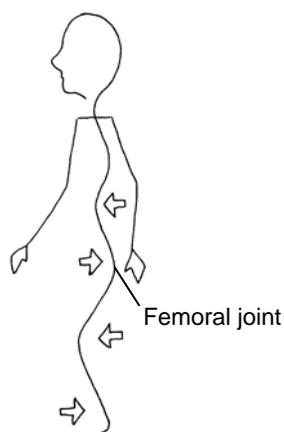
Standing Inch Worm

Excessively contracting the muscles in either the front of your body or along your spine pulls the vertebrae in your spine closer together and squishes the discs between them.

With the Standing Inch Worm, the back of the spine lengthens as the pelvis moves backward; then the front of the spine gets a chance to lengthen as the pelvis moves forward.

Allow your whole spine to participate, from the tip end of your coccyx to the top of your neck. Also allow your abdominal muscles to lengthen instead of contract.

Equipment needed: A sink, countertop, or tabletop



- 1 Rest your hands on the edge of a solid surface about the height of your hips.
- 2 Stand with your feet parallel a comfortable distance apart, close enough to the countertop that your elbows are slightly bent while your hands rest on the edge.
- 3 Without bending over, fold through your hip joints (femoral joints) so that your coccyx (tailbone) releases a bit backward and your knees bend a bit.
- 4 Slide one foot directly back until the toes of that foot are parallel to the heel of your other foot.



- 5 With your fingertips still resting on the countertop, draw your coccyx (tailbone) backward until your torso tilts forward a bit and the toes of your front foot passively release from the floor.

The toes of your front foot pop off of the ground because your leg connects to and follows your pelvis which is moving backward. Let your front foot relax and just rock a bit on the heel which remains in contact with the ground.

Important: Be sure you allow your coccyx to be released backward, not tucked. The backward movement of your coccyx lengthens and relaxes your spine because your spine is a continuum that includes your sacrum (the center back of your pelvis) and your coccyx.



- 6 With your fingertips still resting on the countertop, let your sacrum move forward—but not tuck under—until the toes of your front foot return to the ground, your head moves upward, and the heel of your back foot leaves the ground.

This forward movement of your pelvis gently pushes your spine upward. Your chest moves forward and upward because your ribs wrap around from your spine to your sternum (breastbone).

Allow the *front* of your spine to lengthen up to the top of your neck.

Allow your lower back to gently regain its natural lumbar curve. This is the opposite of flattening your lower back.

- 7 *Slowly and gently* alternate between the two positions:

- Lengthening the back of your spine as your pelvis goes backward
- Lengthening the front of your spine as your pelvis goes forward
- Folding through your femoral joints before each time your pelvis goes backward

This combination opens and relaxes all the areas through which your sciatic nerves thread.

About the Author



Through the writing of books such as *Stop Sciatica Now*, and her private practice as a *Guild Certified Feldenkrais Practitioner^{CM}*, Pamela Kihm's goal is to help people understand healthful movement choices.

With a background as a recreational therapist and exercise teacher, and a degree in Behavioral Science, Pamela had been motivating clients to choose more comfortable options even before completing the 1000+ hour *Feldenkrais Method[®] of Somatic Education Professional Training* in 1991.

Pamela was one of the first exercise teachers to create “low-impact aerobics” with dances she choreographed so that her students could reach aerobic levels without creating joint damage. In addition, she developed a chair-exercise program and subsequently produced the video “Chair-Rhythmics.” She also helped write and produce a video she conceptualized for the *FELDENKRAIS GUILD[®]* of North America, titled “The *Feldenkrais Method[®]*.”

As a *Feldenkrais Practitioner* and exercise trainer for people with challenges, Pamela not only ameliorates symptoms of pain, she helps clients learn how they can move in ways that are more efficient and cause less wear and tear on their bodies. Pamela's clients discover how small modifications to regimens prescribed by the medical community can make exercises even more effective and pain-free.

Pamela says, “It's like solving a puzzle to discover how to help each person in the best way possible.” Many of her students have said, “Why didn't anyone ever tell me this before?” or “It's so logical, but I never would have thought of this myself.” Pamela is now writing several books so **you** don't have to say, “Why didn't anyone ever tell me that?”

You can address e-mail to Pamela through pamela@sciatica-home-treatment.com

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Stop Sciatica Now

Whatever the cause of your sciatica, chances are very good that you can reduce your own pain by following the advice in this book based on the *Feldenkrais Method*[®] of Somatic Education.

The human body is a marvelously complex machine, and its musculo-skeletal system permits a remarkable range of movement. However, we are seldom fully aware of exactly what we do and how we do it. Often we unknowingly injure ourselves, but fortunately our bodies have a wonderful potential for self-healing. Participation in weekly *Feldenkrais Method*[®] *Awareness Through Movement*[®] classes has helped me to learn to re-educate myself, so that I can move more comfortably without pain and without undue limitations. Recently when I developed unexplained sciatic pain, several individual Feldenkrais sessions and continuing classes enabled me to resolve the problem in a relatively short time. Mobility is essential to health, and *Feldenkrais* can be of great help to older people in maintaining their mobility. *Feldenkrais* principles should be included in the curriculum of every medical school.

William B. Spriegel, M.D.