

Are you reading this round shouldered and slumped forward?

By Paula Shingler, BSc, MCSP

You don't run with your shoulders so why should they be important?

First of all a little anatomy lesson!

Basic anatomy lesson first

The shoulder is quite a complex little area made up of the scapula (shoulder blade), clavicle (collarbone) and the humerus (upper arm bone) intricately moving in different planes to allow the arm to move up, down, back, sideways and to rotate in and out. These actions are controlled by a mass of muscles, ligaments and tendons all working together to allow each movement. These muscles link the shoulder to the spine, ribs and lower arm, and in so doing will affect the rest of the body.

Gait and posture

So, anatomy lesson over, but still none the wiser. Let's continue by thinking about gait and then posture which might help.

When we run we use our arms in two ways. Firstly to help propel us forward by working with the legs to give as much power as possible, and secondly to help maintain balance by correcting our centre of gravity. Here is a little scenario to explain; imagine you are thundering downhill to spike the control when you step on a branch that snaps and throws you off balance and potentially smashing into the ground. With both strength and flexibility in the shoulders, we can stretch an arm out, change our

centre of gravity and help regain our balance without falling. You can then just carry on to the control without having to pick yourself up, relocate and waste a valuable few seconds!

Posture has a major part to play in maintaining a good, effective gait. Maintaining posture is helped by strong core, or abdominal muscle, but it also relies on good neck and shoulder positioning. An ideal posture is with the shoulders back and head up. To maintain this we need to keep our shoulders flexible and strong. Our modern lifestyle encourages us to be round shouldered as we lean forward to write articles for the Orienteering magazine, or slump on the sofa after another gruelling State League. Over a period of time the shoulder adapts to this rounded position with the soft tissues at the front shortening and tightening and the ones at the back being over stretched and weakening with lack of use. If the shoulders remain rounded then this will bring your centre of gravity forward and will affect balance and your running style and efficiency. Also it can lead to neck problems - if the shoulders are in a poor position then the neck struggles to maintain an upright position and can eventually lead to abnormal pressure on discs and nerves - not ideal at all.

So what can we do?

Fortunately these soft tissues can be eased back to their normal position with a little exercise. If you do need to improve your

shoulder function it is easy to start with some simple exercises. For flexibility try shoulder shrugging, circling, pulling your shoulder blades towards each other, putting your arm up behind your back - all easy to do anywhere. Exercises should not cause any pain and never try to force the joint to try to get more movement. Start with 5 repetitions of each exercise and build up really slowly. It is of course preferable to see a professional so a specific programme can be made for you. This is especially important if you have ever had an injury that has now cleared up but may have left you with some weakness in a specific muscle or range of movement.

Hopefully now the significance of shoulders is a bit clearer. Basically you need to appreciate that the shoulders are part of our complex body any part of which if not working as it was designed to, will affect the efficiency and smooth functioning of the whole body. We all know that we need to be as efficient as possible when fighting our way through a thick piece of bush, whether we meant to go through it or not!

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