

Dr. Lipoff: Pillow Talk

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Some of my previous articles have discussed mattresses and sleep positions but today we are going to talk about pillows.

When we sleep we do so anywhere from four to eight hours a night. That is roughly up to a quarter of your life spent in sleepy town. So how you sleep can really affect your body.

Let's summarize the best sleep positions to reduce pain in your body. Lying on your back with a pillow beneath your knees reduces low back stress.

The side-lying position is also pretty good for the back. Just try to keep a pillow between your knees to reduce excessive rotation of the hips while you sleep.

I realize the pillow may slip out. That's why duck tape was invented. I'm kidding. You could get a curved pillow or get a body pillow so it is larger and more difficult to kick to the floor.

I didn't mention stomach sleeping. That's right. I didn't. It's the worst! It allows the low back to sway inward, compress your ribs and internal organs, your head turns to one side and your arms typically go overhead. Completely against all the biomechanical rules your body hopes you'll follow.

For instance, unless you walk around all day with your head turned to one side; then you shouldn't sleep like that for four hours, or even four minutes. Now unless you are looking forward to neck or shoulder pain at some point in the near future, please keep my number handy. Otherwise try to get out of that position.

I am a recovered stomach sleeper from long ago so I know it's not easy. It takes time and persistence.

So what happens to our neck while we are sleeping? Here's the rule I preach to my patients. Sleep in a position that tries to keep your head in a similar position to when you are upright.

Keep the nose in line with the buttons of your shirt and your ears in line with your shoulders.

You shouldn't sleep with your head rotated or tipped unnaturally.

So for side-sleeping, adjust your pillows so you can maintain this position. Ask a loved one to see how your alignment is when you lay down or get a mirror.

On your back you certainly don't need much of a pillow or you will prop your head forward and reverse the normal curve of your neck. It would be like everyone who looks in their lap to read, tap their iphone or play a hand-held game. That sounds like all of us.

I try to have a pillow that is about as big as my fist behind my neck and that feels pretty good.

So what pillow is best? Whatever keeps your head in the proper position I mentioned before. It doesn't matter if you have your head on a dog, trash can or sack of potatoes. It is what feels comfortable to you and maintains healthy posture in your spine.

The pillows with the hole in the middle are great for back sleepers, as are the ones with a slight curve in them for the neck. Essentially your head protrudes further than your neck so the extra padding supports your neck well.

For side sleepers you need a thick pillow for proper alignment. I have yet to meet a pillow that is as wide as my shoulder and side of my head. So for this I may have to use 2 pillows.

I also like a down pillow because I can bunch it up for side sleeping or punch a divot in it for back sleeping. That's just my preference.

Tonight, be conscious of the position of your neck and it should help keep you feeling great.

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He received his Bachelor of Science degree from Syracuse University in 1990, a Doctorate of Chiropractic (D.C.) from New York Chiropractic College (NYCC) in 1994 and he became a Certified Fitness Trainer (CFT) in 2005.

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