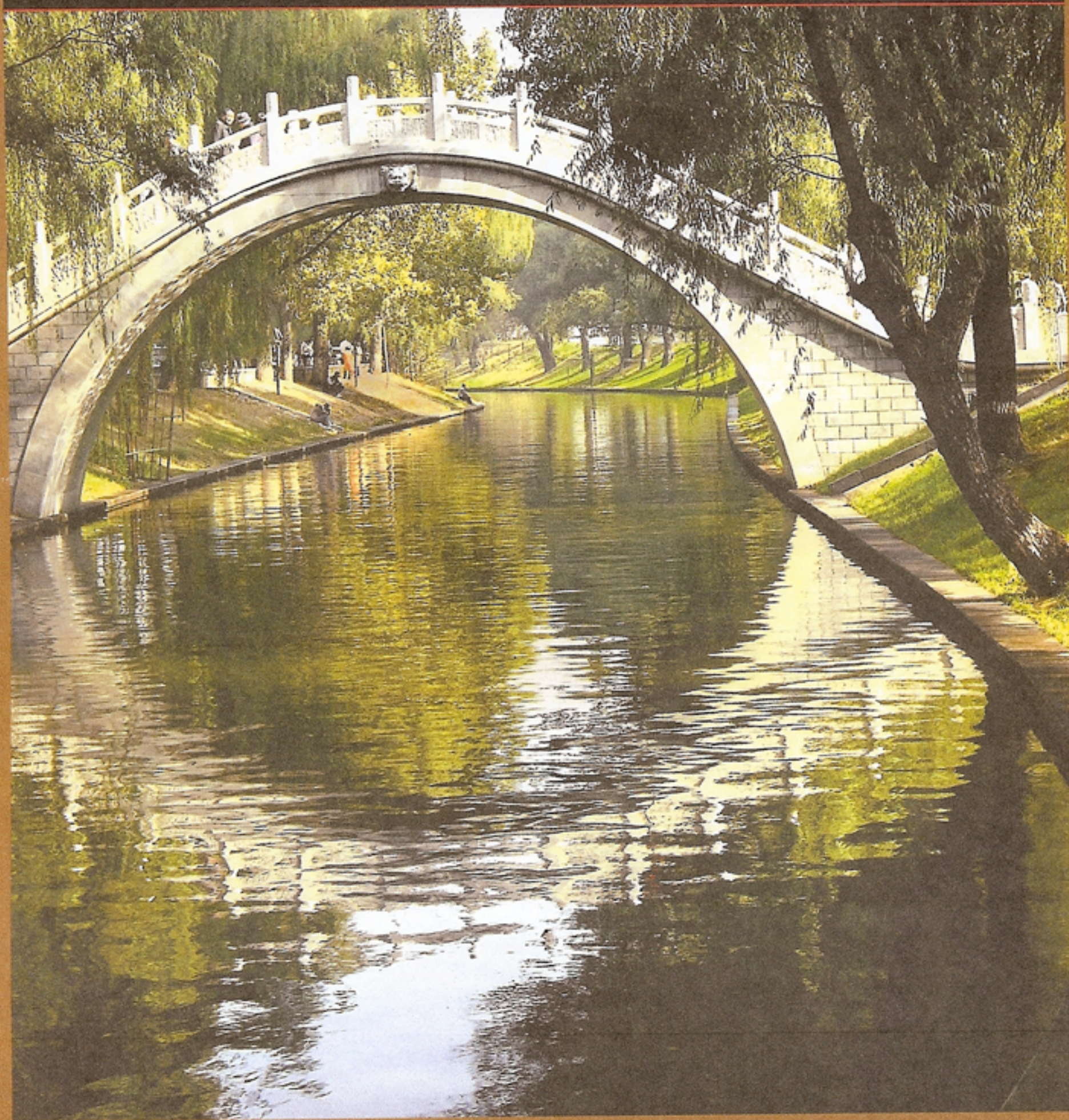


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Shoulder Posture Contributes to Syndromes Involving Multiple Meridians

by Esther Gokhale LAc

Shoulder posture has a pronounced effect on the flow of qi and blood through the chest, arms and shoulder regions. Poor posture in these areas contributes to symptoms and interferes with treatment. Symptoms that can be addressed with improved posture include asthma, upper respiratory tract infections, depression, shoulder pain, carpal tunnel syndrome, repetitive stress injuries and generalized muscle tension. Poor posture is readily assessed by noting where the arms hang relative to the torso, the shape of the chest, and the position of the head. Natural, relaxed and open architecture of this region can be restored with a simple "shoulder roll" exercise, which is described and illustrated below.

As an acupuncturist, of the hundreds of referrals I've received from physicians, most are patients with repetitive stress injuries (RSI) in their hands and arms. These conditions - including carpal tunnel syndrome, tennis elbow, and wrist tendonitis - are the result of inflammation and cumulative injury from repeated use of one part of the body.

Often treat such inflammation with acupuncture, but a critical additional measure in recovering from RSI, as well as in its prevention, is to keep the shoulders in a healthy position which allows adequate blood flow to and from the arms and hands. In our sedentary lifestyles, the shoulder region bears increasing responsibility - literally! - for performing daily activities. We are seeing a corresponding increase in problems stemming from blockages in the shoulders, suggesting that it is especially important to examine how clients use their shoulders. Hunching the shoulders while placing demands on the arms - as when typing, playing a musical instrument, using a game console, or playing a racquet sport - is especially problematic. The activity increases the demand for blood, while the compromised shoulder architecture reduces its supply. Asthma, upper respiratory infections and depression are also influenced by shoulder posture. When poor posture contributes to problems or interferes with treatment, improved posture will result in relief.

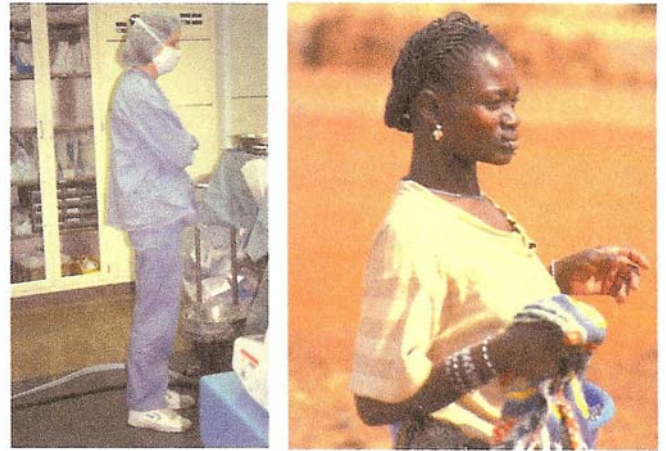
Nine meridians are affected by shoulder posture: Heart, Small Intestine, Lung,

"Where poor posture contributes to problems and/or interferes with treatment, improved posture will result in relief"

Large Intestine, Pericardium, Triple Burner, Urinary Bladder, Stomach, and Gall Bladder. The general function of these meridians is affected by any "jag" in their course, and the actions of the individual points in the area are compromised. Smooth flow of qi in the Heart meridian correlates with one's sense of self; strong, even flow generates self-confidence, a feeling of self-empowerment, and a strong sense of boundaries. The entry point of the Heart meridian, HE-1, is located in the axilla. On the Small Intestine meridian, SI-9, 10 and 11 are mainly associated with the musculoskeletal health of the neck, shoulder and arm. LU-1, the front *mu* point of the Lung, is affected by tight pectoral muscles. These draw the shoulders inward, compromise the flow of qi and result in or exacerbate psychological symptoms such as grief, depression and nostalgia, as well as more physical symptoms such as asthma and increased susceptibility to upper respiratory infections. U-15 is important for the health of the shoulder and affects the function of the U channel points further out on the arm. Blockage here correlates with repetitive stress injuries. Blockage at SI-14 can result in rotator cuff problems, tendonitis and carpal tunnel syndrome. GB-21, ST-12, and the Urinary Bladder channel points on the upper back are all affected by the altered strains on the muscles in the area caused by slumped shoulders. In my clinical experience, of all the effects listed above, the most significant are the effects of slumped shoulders on GB-21 and LU-1.

Assessing Shoulder Posture

In healthy posture, the shoulders sit superior and slightly posterior to the torso. Arms hang down toward the back of the rib



Left: Poor shoulder alignment (111me, 0111 the United States). Right: Excellent shoulder alignment (villager from Burkina Faso).

cage. The humerus hangs more or less parallel to the spine and perpendicular to the ground. When the shoulders are hunched, the arms will hang more toward the front of the ribcage, possibly at an angle. A second diagnostic site is the neck: When the shoulders are relaxed and positioned atop the ribcage, the neck tends to rise above the spine and move to the back of the ribcage. If the neck is inclined forward; the shoulders drawn in toward the front of the chest, and there is a pronounced S-curve from the upper back through the neck to the head, it is likely that posture is contributing to the person's problems - and it is also likely that restoring good posture will result in an improvement in symptoms.

Performing the Shoulder Roll

The "shoulder roll" is a simple but effective means to restore the natural relaxed architecture of the shoulder region. It is one of the most powerful techniques for ensuring good circulation in the arms, increasing breathing capacity and keeping the upper back from hunching forward.

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Performing the Shoulder Roll

Perform these steps slowly and smoothly. Begin by relaxing both shoulders and the front and back of the chest as much as you can. Then:

1. Move one shoulder forward, exaggerating a hunch.
2. Lift the shoulder toward your ear.
3. Roll the shoulder back as far as you can. Feel the shoulder blade moving over the rib cage.
4. Press the shoulder down and back, sliding the shoulder blade down along the spine.
5. Finally, but still gently, release all muscular tension. The shoulder should remain naturally in this new position—hanging down at the back of the rib cage. Do not hold it there—release all muscular tension, front and back.
6. While keeping this first shoulder relaxed, repeat the steps with the other shoulder.

When doing the shoulder roll, imagine the shoulder's soft tissue ratcheting back one notch on a cogged wheel. The shoulders will tend to remain in this position without effort. If they tend to spring forward, this could be due to particularly tight pectoral muscles. In doing the shoulder roll, keep your ribs anchored down, so the lower

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shorter because your arms now originate further back than before. This is a healthy home base position that you want to maintain during activities. The solution for the shorter reach is to adjust your distance from your task. When working at a computer, for example, you may need to move the keyboard closer. When driving, you may need to move your seat closer to the steering wheel.

Teaching the Shoulder Roll

To provide hands-on guidance in teaching the shoulder roll, follow these steps:

1. Place the base of one hand on the shoulder blade and the other over the pectoral area, where the arm meets the chest, with the thumbs facing away from the torso.

border of the ribcage is flush with the torso. Be sure you don't tighten and sway your lower back as you settle your shoulders.

After doing a shoulder roll, you may notice that the reach of your arms is

2. Ask your pupil to relax, and then gently use the thumb of your back hand and the base of your front hand to lift the person's arm forward, then up and then back, ratcheting the soft tissue back into a notch in the shoulder joint further back than the usual one.
3. You should feel the shoulder blade move backwards, and as you bring the arm down the whole arm should settle behind the midline of the body.

One word of caution: Do not pull on your pupil's skin, which is ineffective for repositioning the arm and can cause discomfort in the soft tissue. Concentrate on using your bones to move the pupil's bones as you move the arm.

Conclusion

When the arms hang loosely from a well-positioned shoulder girdle, the ribs expand freely, facilitating deep inhalation. The arms can move freely relative to the torso. Qi and blood flow freely through important meridians nourishing the arms and chest, facilitating treatment of problems in these areas - acupuncture is more effective and herbs deliver their healing energy more efficiently. The shoulder roll is a simple, quick, easy technique that can bring immediate benefit to the entire region, simultaneously easing and preventing multiple problems that arise in the chest, arms and upper back.

Esther Gokhale LAc, author of 8 Steps to a Pain-Free Back, studied biochemistry at Harvard and Princeton, and Chinese medicine at the San Francisco College of Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine. For a free patient handout on the shoulder roll email info@egwellness.com. Website: www.egwellness.com.



Shoulder roll.