



# Getting Comfortable with Postural Analysis

By David Kent, LMT, NCTMB

Keeping It Simple Series

We all recognize the importance of getting our cars serviced regularly so that they run at their optimal level. Not surprisingly, the same is true of the human body. In fact, there is a very useful car-related analogy we can use when it comes to describing postural analysis: a front-end alignment and wheel balance.

The word "posture" is derived from the Latin verb "ponere," meaning "to put or place." The word "analysis" comes from the Greek word "analyein," meaning "to break up." Therefore, postural analysis is simply the process of "breaking up" the body to determine where it should be "put or placed." This article will review the body positioning for the purpose of taking a standing (static) postural analysis so that you can custom design your clients' therapy sessions.

When a vehicle's alignment is off, it manifests as uneven tread wear and loss of tire life. Likewise, when a car's tires are not properly balanced, ride quality

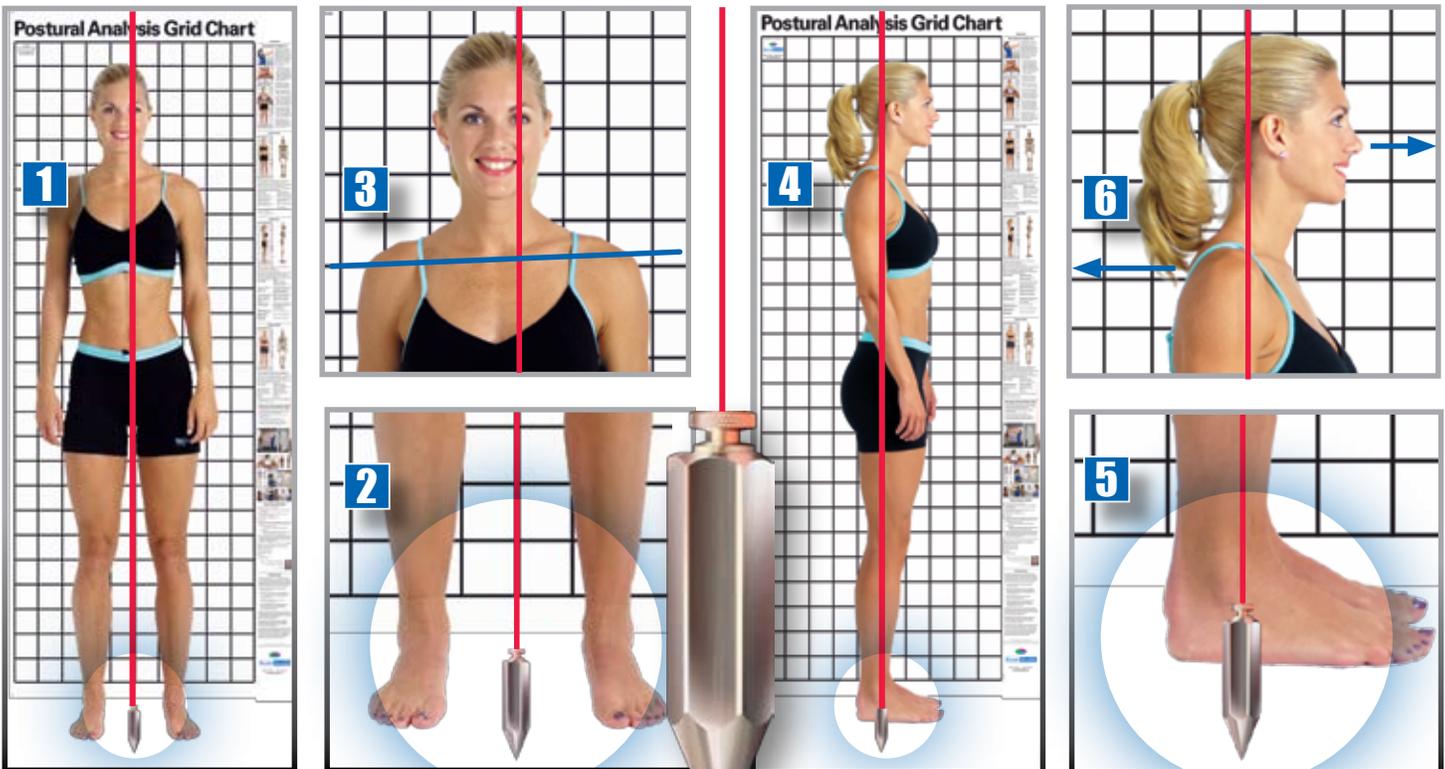
is diminished, tire life is shortened, and bearings and shock-absorber performance suffers. When one's posture is off, the human body also experiences a range of problems: restricted range of motion; pain; organ dysfunction; and joint, tendon, ligament and muscle stress, to name a few.

The body, like tires, has an ideal position. It, too, must be balanced to run smoothly and last a long time. For a mechanic to assess and adjust the front end of a vehicle, he must first check wheel positioning for deviations from the norm. To do this, he sets the wheels in a standard position and conducts an evaluation. In massage terms, this is the equivalent of taking a postural analysis. A mechanic's objective findings are also reported in terms we can relate to the body. For example, the mechanical term "toe-in or toe-out" is what we would call "internal or external rotation." And what a mechanic calls "camber," we call "tilt."

When we report to a mechanic that the tire tread on our vehicle is wearing unevenly and the steering wheel vibrates, we have given our subjective complaints. The mechanic hears this complaint frequently and knows exactly what needs to be done. Before he can conduct his evaluation, however, he needs to use the proper equipment to access and design a repair plan, according to the car model's specifications.

In the same way, clients often make subjective complaints to us about headaches and neck and back pain. These are common complaints we hear frequently. Just like a mechanic, we need to use the proper equipment to access and design a customized therapy session to meet each individual client's needs, focusing on both short- and long-term goals.

The "manufacturer specifications" for the human body include the anatomical planes that show us the ideal positioning



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of joints and bones. While individuals are not expected to be perfectly positioned, we want to facilitate the best posture possible through massage therapy. According to *Muscles: Testing and Function* "Ideal skeletal alignment... involves a minimal amount of stress and strain, and is conducive to maximal efficiency of the body." Moreover, "the intersection of the sagittal and coronal midplanes of the body forms a line that is analogous to the gravity line. Around this line, the body is hypothetically in a position of equilibrium. Such a position implies a balanced distribution of weight, and a stable position of each joint. When viewing a posture in a standing [position], a plumb line is used to represent a line of reference... Since the only fixed point in the standing posture is at the base where the feet are in contact with the floor, the point of reference must be at the base," or the foundation of the body.<sup>1</sup>

Whether you work in spa, clinic, medical office, fitness center, or some other venue, there are certain things you must do to conduct an effective postural analysis.

### Postural Analysis Checklist

- Hang a plumb bob approximately 3 feet in front of a postural analysis grid chart. The plumb bob should be approximately a ¼ inch off the floor.
- The client should be:
  - in bare feet
  - wear clothing that allows for visual observation of body contours.
  - Standing between the postural chart and the plumb line, but his/her body should not be touching the plumb line or chart.
  - Client should place the hair behind the ears as the external auditory meatus is an anatomical landmark that is used as a reference point.
- Position the feet in relation to the plumb line:
  - For anterior and posterior view 2
  - For a lateral view, the plumb line is immediately anterior to lateral malleolus. See images # 4 and 5

Now, stand a few feet back from the plumb line. Using a digital camera, move from side to side (right to left) until the plumb line is lined up with the center line of the grid chart. Take a photo of the client and make any necessary notes for your objective your findings.

We all know the saying "A picture is worth a thousand words". In images #1 and 3 it is easy to see how the right shoulder is higher than the left. We see the torso and head are to right of the midsagittal plane. In images 4 and 6 it is easy to see the forward head posture and the right shoulder being posterior to the coronal plane. These "deviations" have numerous origins. A muscle movement chart will help quickly determine which muscles are shortened and which ones are lengthened helping you design a customized treatment plan.

There are many advantages of taking postural photos, including

- Documenting posture before and after a series of treatments;
- Educating clients about their postural distortions and demonstrating causes of pain, muscle weakness, etc;
- Showing clients, physicians, and other relevant parties a client's treatment progress;
- Presenting clients with clear treatment solutions;
- Recording and documenting the client's postural changes;
- Customizing treatment plans; and
- Confirming your objective findings via trigger point charts. (See my article, "Charting Progress: Visuals for Success" in the February issue of *Massage Today* for more about this.)

When you take the time to administer a precise posture evaluation for your clients and devise a customized treatment plan, you will gain their respect and earn a reputation as a top massage therapist. Your clients will also appreciate how you utilized the information to educate them.

Don't let the idea of conducting a postural analysis intimidate you. There are many things we do every day that we needed to learn to do for the first time. Once

you get comfortable with posture, it will be easier to think about each client as an individual and know how to develop special treatment plans for each person. Over time, posture analysis becomes easy—second nature. You just need to start doing it.

For more information about posture analysis, as well as several tools to get started, visit [KentHealth.com](http://KentHealth.com).

**David Kent, LMT, NCTMB**, is an international presenter, product innovator and writer. His clinic, Muscular Pain Relief Center, is in Deltona, Florida, where he receives referrals from various healthcare providers. David teaches Human Dissection, Deep Tissue Medical Massage and Practice Building seminars, and has developed a line of products, including the Postural Analysis Grid Chart™, Trigger Point Charts, Muscle Movement Charts, Personalized Essential Office Forms™, and DVD programs. Visit [www.KentHealth.com](http://www.KentHealth.com) or call (888) 574-5600 for more information.

<sup>1</sup> Kendall FP, McCreary EK, Provan PG. *Muscles: Testing and Function*, 4th ed. Williams & Wilkins, 1993: pg 71.