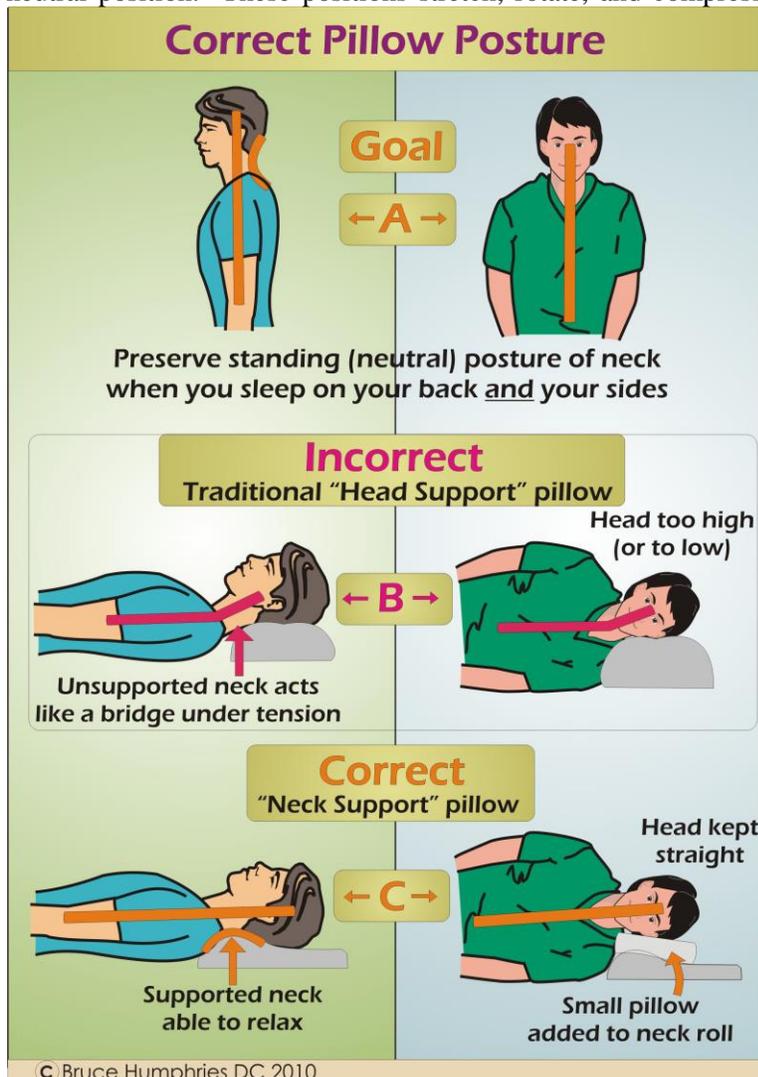


## CORRECT NECK SLEEPING ERGONOMICS / CORRECT PILLOW USE

Do you wake up with neck pain? How about headaches? If so, you may well need to use an orthopedic pillow to achieve proper sleeping ergonomics. Why is sleeping in an ergonomically correct position important? Because sleeping in the wrong position will put mechanical stress on your neck. When you stay in a compromised position for hours at a time, the mechanical stress can lead to a strained neck.

### CORRECT CERVICAL (NECK) POSTURE WHILE SLEEPING

What is the proper way to position your head and neck when you sleep? You want your head and neck placed in the neutral position. When you stand straight, your head and neck are in a straight line when observed from the front, and there is a neck curve when viewed from the side. This is the neutral position (see drawing "A" below). When you sleep, you want to preserve this straight line and neck curve. Allowing your head to move to the left or right, or having a pillow push your head forward, is not the neutral position. These positions stretch, rotate, and compress the spine. The neutral position, on the



other hand, allows your neck to be in the most relaxed placement and is the position you want to achieve as you sleep.

Unfortunately, traditional pillows do not provide the support needed to keep your head in the neutral and relaxed position (drawing "B"). When a person has no neck pain or headaches, they can get away with a traditional pillow. This is because their healthy neck is flexible and adaptable and can handle improper mechanical stresses. However, once injured, there is very little ability for the neck to handle improper mechanical stresses and pain soon follows.

So how is the proper support provided? A correctly designed orthopedic pillow will promote and help you achieve the neutral position.

When you sleep, there are three positions in which you can place your body: Face up (on your back), on your sides, and face down.

Face down is the worst option as far as your neck is concerned. Your back

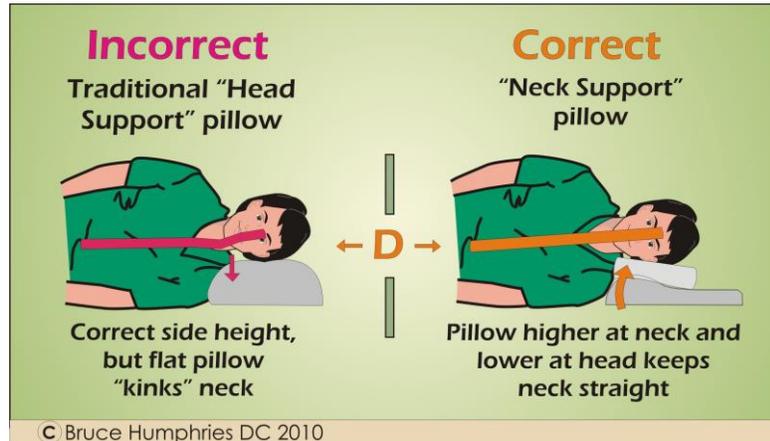
may like face down, but it forces your neck to aggressively twist and compress. This position is as far away from neutral as you can get. I have had many patients solve their neck complaints by simply abandoning sleeping face down!

Sleeping face up (back sleeping), and on your sides (side sleeping) are the correct options for good neck positioning. But there is a big challenge. Your neck has very different requirements for back sleeping and side sleeping. When you sleep on your back, your neck needs to be supported by a "neck roll" pillow to achieve the neutral position. In other words, it is your neck, not your head, that needs a pillow.

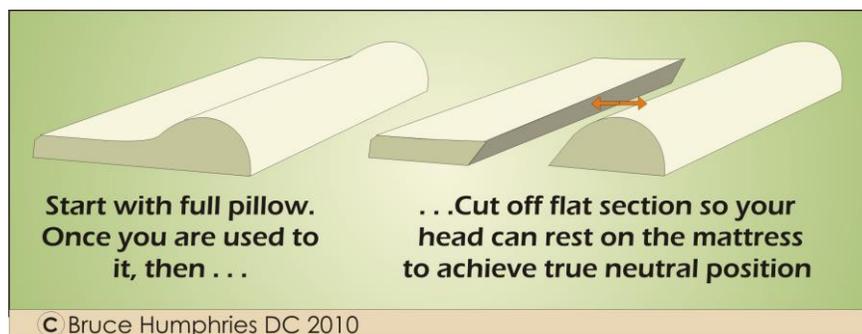
However, this neck roll pillow will be too low for side sleeping. To make up for the height of your shoulders, the side sleeping position needs to be higher than the neck roll allows.

So how is this done? The best way to achieve this is with a “dual pillow” approach (drawing “C” – previous page). You start with a good neck roll pillow as a base pillow. Then you place a small pillow on the outside edges of the neck roll to elevate your neck in the side position. Thus each position will be supported as you move from side to back to side. (Changing positions, by the way, is good for your neck. You want to vary your position from time to time during the night.)

Placing a small pillow on a neck roll provides an additional benefit. You will notice that when viewed from the side, this dual pillow will be higher near your shoulders (because it is on the neck roll), and lower toward your head. Placing the pillow here helps to support the side of your neck as compared to just your head (drawing “D”→). If kept flat (no angle), your head will kink.



Once you are noticing relief and are getting used to the dual pillow, there is an additional step you may want to take. In addition to the neck roll, most orthopedic pillows have a flat section that supports the head. This section keeps the neck from completely achieving the neutral position (See drawing ↓). Once a patient gets use to the new pillow we will have them cut the flat back away so their head touches the mattress. Once the head hits the mattress, then the neck is truly in the neutral position.



What if you only sleep on your side? Then all you have to do is make sure the side pillow is high enough and adds the little extra support under the neck. A word of caution: If you only use a tall side pillow, and occasionally end up on your back, this pillow will greatly push your head forward and out of the neutral position. So if you do occasionally end up on your back, you should still use the dual pillow approach.

### WHICH PILLOW TO USE

There are many orthopedic pillows on the market that claim to offer correct support for both back and side sleeping. Unfortunately the challenge of a different pillow for sleeping on your back and one for sleeping on your sides is hard to overcome. The pillows I see on the market fall short. They claim to address both issues, but if the pillow is designed well for one position, it will sacrifice the other. I suggest getting a good neck roll pillow and adding a soft couch cushion for the side position (see drawing ↓). You can get these neck roll pillows from your chiropractor or home health care stores.



If you aren't sure that you should buy a neck roll pillow, then try using a rolled-up towel. This option will not be as comfortable as foam in the long run, but it may help you to realize that you should get a good pillow. As far as the side pillow is concerned, I tell people to get a 16" x 16" soft couch pillow, feather filled if possible. Keep it soft so your ears can "sit" into it.

### **SUMMARY**

Correct neck posture while sleeping is an important key to achieving and maintaining a healthy neck. This will go a long way to helping lessen and even avoiding neck pain and headaches.