Posture
Staying Injury Free

It's important to realise that the playing positions we adopt today may well impact on us in the future.
During my late teens, I reached the final of a national competition, where I was to perform Mozart's G Major Flute Concerto. In the lead up to the competition, I began to experience playing related pain for the first time, which made practising almost intolerable. While I did compete, my practice time had been limited, resulting in a far from ideal performance. Later, I was fortunate in finding an outstanding physiotherapist who assisted me improve my playing position, and provide valuable strengthening and stretching exercises to put me back on track.

These physical issues tend to recur during times of heavy playing loads, or high stress. A recent international survey of flautists showed that these problems are common in the flute community. Players and teachers from a wide range of backgrounds were asked if they had ever experienced flute playing related discomfort or pain that was severe enough to distract while performing. Over 49% of respondents (192 players) said "yes", while over 26% (103 players) said that they were in pain at the time of completing the survey.¹

Over the years, I've realized that many of my concerns with playing related discomfort could have been prevented with greater physical awareness during playing, regular exercise and better stress management. Musically speaking, poor positioning and excess muscle tension can lead to a loss of tonal quality and fluidity of technique, poor projection and intonation problems. It is tempting to think purely in terms of musical outcomes, yet an awareness of what we are doing physically is hugely important in keeping our bodies in good shape and free of pain.

The nature of our playing position is essentially quite static, anti-gravity, and off to one side of our body, so muscular imbalances can occur, especially when fatigued. While a perfect position for our spine may not be achievable, we can certainly aim to optimise the way we hold the flute, resulting in both musical and physical benefits.

Here are some postural tendencies to avoid, as they may lead to future discomfort:

1. Shoulders rolling forwards: With the left arm crossing to the right side of the body to hold the flute, some rolling forward of the shoulders (particularly the left) is inevitable. However, allowing the shoulders to roll forward more than necessary may cause tension in the chest, and weak upper back muscles.

2. Neck falling or tilting: This position is common, particularly among beginners, and alto or bass flute players. Aim to keep your spine in neutral position (the way the skeleton or spine is normally aligned). A neck tilt places substantial load on the muscles around your neck and shoulders.²

Very small beginners may be able to avoid neck tilting by using curved head joints or the Yamaha Fife, as the weight of the flute is kept closer to the body.

3. Raised shoulders: As you bring the flute to your face, avoid the tendency to raise your shoulders, which puts strain on the neck and upper back. This position may be difficult to avoid when practising for extended durations, so it is advisable to take regular practice breaks to give your muscles a rest.
Avoid lifting your elbows too high, as this also places increased load on the shoulders, neck and upper back. This is demonstrated here:

4. Playing with straight fingers: This causes tension in the forearms, as well as slowing finger technique.
Activity: Without holding the flute, straighten the fingers of one hand, while feeling the forearm muscles with the other. Notice the tension in the forearm.

5. Raising wrists and elbows: Sometimes players have a tendency to lift their wrists and elbows, for example, when changing from C – D (on the staff). This can be remedied by ensuring the fingers remain in the centre of the keys and lifting them off in a curved position. Make sure the flute is correctly aligned and ensure the right thumb supports the flute without sliding. Keep your left pointer finger in contact with the body of the flute in a curved position, not allowing it to straighten, or lift away from the flute.

Some other tips:
Avoid practising to the point where muscles are completely fatigued or when you are tired.
Alternate flute and piccolo practice
Avoid sitting for long periods of time; stand or walk around during breaks.

Check posture and take breaks in non-musical activities, such as computing and playing other instruments.
Avoid “articulating” with the head (jerky movements)
Avoid bending the wrist towards the ground as this restricts finger movement and causes tension in the forearm.
Avoid bending forwards excessively
Exercise regularly
If you have ruled out postural flaws and are still feeling discomfort, see a doctor, physiotherapist, or other practitioner for advice.
Learn stress management strategies
Advice for Band and Ensemble Players
Over 94% of 220 teachers surveyed said they had attended school or community band or ensemble rehearsals, observing flute players sitting too close together, resulting in poor postures.¹
One player here is twisting her spine, with her arm behind the chair because of the lack of space:

It is important to ensure that there is sufficient space between players, with chairs angled, so all can see the conductor without twisting.

We all want to be able to fully enjoy making music, which is an important means of self-expression for many of us. It can be distressing to have to take time off playing because of discomfort or pain. Therefore, throughout the process of learning about the musical side of flute playing, let’s not forget to be aware of the physical aspects. The simple and commonsense steps we take today to minimize the load on our bodies are likely to assist us in ensuring a long and happy flute playing life.


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