

## Physical Decadence.

### THE INFLUENCE OF DRESS IN PRODUCING THE PHYSICAL DECADENCE OF AMERICAN WOMEN.

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THE injury inflicted upon the body at its central portion by constriction of the waist, attacks the very citadel of its strength and vigour, the stomach and its associate organs constituting the head-quarters for the supply of force and energy for the whole system. It is doubtless for this reason that the great abdominal brain, the largest collection of nerve matter in the sympathetic system, is found in such close relation to the stomach. Lying as it does, exactly in the plane of the waist, any abnormal pressure at this point must act directly upon this great centre of reflex nervous activity.

By the inactivity of the muscles of the trunk and the failure of development due to continued pressure, the muscles of the central and anterior portions of the trunk become abnormally weak, so that their natural tone is insufficient to support the abdominal contents in their normal position. As I have already shown, an additional injury results from the failure of these weakened muscles to perform their duty as guys, which balance the upper half of the pelvis upon the trunk, and by their efficient action in health, maintain a graceful and healthful poise of the body.

The strong and beautiful curves which are observed in a spirited horse are not only attractive from an æsthetic point of view, but are also of the highest significance from a physiological standpoint. In the healthy, vigorous animal one observes that the head is held high, the neck and back strongly curved, the limbs firmly set, and the whole expression indicates vigour and strength. The same is equally true of the human body. An erect head, well curved back, prominent chest, retracted abdomen, and firmly set limbs, are indicative of an energised carriage of the body which is characteristic of health. The flat chest, posterior dorsal curve, projecting chin, protruding abdomen, are equally indicative of a relaxed and weak carriage of the body, characteristic of feebleness and disease. The spiritless and tired horse does not hold his head down; he lacks the vigour and disposition to hold it up. So the woman who has been

accustomed to the support of stays of steel or bone, finds herself, when without these means of support, feeling, as she says, "as though she would fall to pieces." The muscles of the waist lack the ability to balance the chest and shoulders upon the hips.

As I shall show you the direct effect of the corset, and of any constriction of the waist, is to break down the natural curves of the back, straightening the spine, thus depressing the chest, and causing the shoulders to fall forward, and producing general collapse of the front wall of the trunk.

In consequence of the weakening of the muscles which support the trunk, and especially weakness of the waist muscles, an ungraceful and unnatural carriage of the body appears, not only in walking and standing, but in sitting. The weak-waisted woman is comfortable only when sitting in a rocking or easy chair. She cannot be comfortable unless the back is supported; consequently, in sitting the muscles of the trunk are completely relaxed, thus causing collapse of the waist and protrusion of the lower abdomen by the depression at the waist occasioned by the depression of the ribs.

Such persons, in standing, assume a great variety of awkward and unhealthful positions. The most common faults are dropping the shoulders, projecting the chin, hips too far forward, weight resting upon the heels or upon one foot, and a general lack of even and graceful balance of the body. In walking, the forward position of the hips makes it impossible to plant the whole sole of the foot down at once and firmly, so the weight is thrust continually upon the heels. This difficulty is increased by wearing high-heeled shoes. A swinging, swaying, wriggling, or otherwise awkward gait, is the most common mode of walking one sees in women, very few of whom are good walkers, in consequence of the inability to balance the body, through the weakness of the muscles of the waist.

The fourth charge which I have made against the common mode of dress, in which the waist is constricted, is that it induces and necessitates an abnormal mode of respiration.

In normal breathing, the shape of the chest-cavity is changed in the act of inspiration in such a manner that its diameter is increased in all directions. The greatest increase, however, is in its longitudinal diameter, due to flattening of the diaphragm; and in the lateral transverse diameter of the lower part of the chest, due to the action of the inspiratory muscles, and, according to Brüger, also in part due to the depression of the abdominal viscera by the contracting diaphragm. In normal respiration in children of both sexes, and in both men and

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