

Core Benefits

Anyone who has stepped inside a gym will be familiar with the term 'core strength' or 'core stability'. What do these mean, and why are they important?

Place both feet flat on the floor, pull your shoulders back, and pull in your belly button. You've just found your core muscles. These muscles circle your waist and your lower back, providing support and stability not only for your back, but also for your legs, arms, and shoulders.

Strong core muscles make everyday activities easier, improve endurance, and reduce the risk of injury. They allow you to twist, bend, and lift more easily; make running and walking less of an effort; and improve your balance, flexibility, and co-ordination.

Perhaps the greatest benefit of a strong core, however, is that it helps to prevent lower back pain. Estimates suggest that eight out of 10 people will experience some type of lower back pain in their lifetime, causing much inconvenience, discomfort, and lost productivity.

The reasons for this high prevalence include inactivity, rising levels of obesity, and increasingly, sitting down for lengthy periods of time, whether at work, commuting, or at home. (Of course injury is also a cause of pain, so if you do suffer back pain, see a doctor, chiropractor, or physiotherapist for a diagnosis.)

When you are sitting, the chair is supporting your body, rather than your muscles. Consequently, your core muscles grow weaker through lack of use, and can no longer effectively protect your spine.

Regular gym visitors are likely to be already working their core muscles. When in the gym, ensure you do a variety of exercises to target different abdominal and back muscles. If you work only one or two sets of muscles while ignoring others, you'll create an imbalance which can lead to back pain.

If you don't work out in a gym, it doesn't mean you're a lost cause! You can target your core muscles on a daily basis, simply through increased awareness. Try the following:

- When sitting for lengthy periods, ensure you sit up tall, with your shoulders back and chin in. Keep your feet flat on the floor, as crossing your legs can cause an imbalance of your pelvis and spine. Focus on pulling in your belly button, which will tighten the core tummy muscles.
- When standing, ensure your weight is evenly distributed between both feet, and concentrate on creating a mild tension throughout your core area.
- Create tension in your abdominal muscles when you're walking, and periodically tighten tummy and gluteal muscles simultaneously.

Practise these exercises daily:

1. Standing with your feet shoulder-width apart, place your hands on your lower abdomen, between your belly button and pubic bone. Slowly pull in your lower stomach muscles until it feels like they're gently pulling away from your hands. Hold for 10 seconds, and repeat 10 times. Breathe normally.

2. Position yourself on your hands and knees, keeping your spine in a neutral position with the head straight, eyes looking at the floor, and chin tucked in. Pull in your stomach muscles, and without moving your body (ie. shifting weight) extend one leg back to a straight position, and at the same time reach forward with the opposite arm. Hold for 10 seconds, or until you lose position. Repeat with the other side. Perform five repetitions.



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“Three or four short walks a day may offer a better way to keep your blood pressure healthy than going to the gym.”

Journal of Hypertension.

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Get set for Heart week!

The 29th of April kicks off National Heart week. With cardiovascular disease accounting for 40% of all deaths, there's never been a better time to pay attention to your heart and give it the exercise it needs. It doesn't have to be hard - a pedometer can help you build incidental activity into even the busiest day. Aim for 10,000 steps, and do your heart a favour.

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