

# **Fire Up Your Core**

**30 Ways to  
Boost  
Your  
Strength  
& Power**



# Fire Up Your Core

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# Fire Up Your Core

## Introduction

If you weaken the center of any freestanding structure it becomes unstable. Eventually, everyday wear-and-tear takes its toll, causing the structure to buckle under pressure. This is exactly what happens when the core muscles are weak – it compromises your body's ability to support the frame properly.

In recent years, there has been a lot of buzz about the importance of a strong core – and there is a valid reason for this. The core is where all of the powerful movements in the body originate – so it can essentially be thought of as your “center of power.”

When most people hear the term “core,” they automatically think of the abdominals. But the core is more complex than having a great “six pack.” This section of the body consists of several different muscles that work simultaneously to provide a solid base of support for the upper and lower body.

### **Benefits of Doing Core Strength Exercises**

- Strengthening your core reduces the risk of injury -- especially to your spine.
- Having a strong core improves your performance in sports.
- A strong core increases your overall coordination and stability
- Having a strong core improves your posture.
- A strong core protects your spine and helps shield it from injury
- Having a strong core increases the effectiveness of your workouts.

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## Muscles in the Core

There are several major muscles, as well as some lesser known muscles groups included in the core.

Major Muscles in the Core:

- **External Obliques** – These muscles are located on each side, and in the front of the rectus abdominis. The external obliques help flex the spine, and rotate the upper body. These muscles also assist with sideways bending and compression in the abdomen.
- **Internal Obliques** – These muscles are located just below the external obliques, and run in the opposite direction. The internal obliques rotate the trunk, helps flex the spinal column, assists with sideways bending, and helps with abdomen compression.
- **Transverse Abdominis (TVA)** – This is the deepest of the abdominal muscles. This muscle wraps around your torso, and acts like a corset to support the spine and stabilize the body. The TVA also helps compress the internal organs, and aids in respiration.
- **Erector Spinae** – This group of muscles and tendons start near the sacrum, and extend up the length of back.
- **Rectus Abdominis** – This is the most recognized muscle in the core, and commonly referred to as the “six pack.” The rectus abdominis helps flex the spinal column, and stabilize the trunk when bending.

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Lesser Known Muscles Included in the Core:

- hip Flexors
- gluteus
- hamstring
- hip adductors

## **Cause of Weak Core Muscles**

Babies are consistently tapping into their center of power because they rely on their core muscles to learn how to balance, turn over, crawl, sit up, and walk. For this reason, young children typically have strong core muscles.

As time passes, inactivity sets in, and the core muscles are not activated as often as they once were. And the end result is a weakened midsection that no longer supports your frame properly. The weaker your core muscles get, the more vulnerable you become to a number of problems.

## **Back Pain and Core Strength**

When your core is not conditioned, it causes loss of appropriate lumbar curve. And when everyday activities such as bending, slumping, lifting children, and standing puts pressure on already vulnerable back muscles, you become more prone to back injuries.

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Unfortunately, core weakness is not uncommon – and low back pain is one of the most prevalent ailments associated with poor core conditioning. This is especially true when the deep abdominal muscles are weak. The most common reasons for back pain include:

- herniated disc
- injuries
- muscle strains
- sprains
- muscle spasms
- fibromyalgia
- osteoarthritis
- sciatica
- being overweight

Anyone who's ever suffered from low back pain can vouch for the misery it causes. Back pain keeps you from enjoying life, and can result in costly doctor visits, and potentially dangerous pain relieving drugs. But there is good news; most back pain is due to postural alignment problems, and can be easily prevented with regular core conditioning exercises.

In addition to core training exercise, you should also work to improve your posture. This ensures that your weight is evenly distributed throughout the body, and that your muscles are being used efficiently to prevent excess pressure on the spine, and supporting ligaments.

Proper Sitting Posture:

- Sit with your back straight, shoulders back, and your bum touching the back of the chair.
- Distribute your body weight evenly on both hips.
- Keep your knees and hips even.
- Keep your feet flat on the floor.
- Stand up every 30 minutes to stretch your back.



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## Proper Standing Posture

- Keep your spine straight, your chin up, and your head centered above the shoulders.
- Keep the knees slightly bent, and your feet slightly shoulder width apart.
- Move around periodically to avoid standing still too long.

## Proper Lifting Posture:

- Stand close to the object with your feet wide apart.
- Tighten your abdominal muscles.
- Keep your back straight, and bend at the knees.
- Squat down to pick up the object (never bend at the waist).
- Hold the object close to your body, and lift with your leg muscles.
- Never lift heavy objects higher than waist length.
- If the object is too heavy, find someone to help.

### Did You Know...

#### **You Can Fire Up Your Core Without Moving a Muscle.**

Your core isn't like other muscles in your body. While most of your muscles create movement, your core muscles resist it. They are designed to maintain stability and protect your spine when you bend and twist.

#### **Slouching Sabotages Your Six Pack**

One of the benefits of strengthening your core is that it helps improve your posture. However, if you don't make an effort to maintain proper posture when you're not in the gym, you'll kill your chances of getting the killer six pack you want. To maximize your core training, keep your back straight and maintain good posture throughout the day.

#### **Your Core Always Fires First**

When you exercise and lift weights (or doing anything else), your core muscles are always activated first. Your core stabilizes your body and is the center for all the energy you exert. Energy is transferred from your core to your arms and legs. The stronger your core, the more overall strength you will have.

# Fire Up Your Core

## How Can I Tell If My Core Muscles Are Weak?

The spinal column is responsible for sending messages to the muscles in the body. And when it is not supported properly, your muscles don't produce as much power as they should. This is why athletes undergo rigorous core training, because it helps them maximize the strength and power they need to perform their athletic duties.

Even if you exercise regularly, you may not be doing enough to adequately strengthen your core. If you really want to know how strong your midsection is, take the plank test.

If you can hold the plank position for more than two-minutes, while maintaining proper form, your midsection is in good shape. If you can only hold the position for one to two-minutes, your core could use a little work. But if you crumble sooner than one-minute, you have a lot of work to do.

### Plank Pose Directions:

- Get down on your hands and knees.
- Keep your eyes on the floor.
- Put your forearms on the floor (palms down).
- Extend both legs behind you (your body should be in a straight line) and hold the position for as long as you can.

Thankfully, it doesn't matter how out of shape your core is, a regular routine of focused core training can help you build a rock-solid midsection. Even if your core is in tip-top condition, exercise is still essential to maintain its strength.



# Fire Up Your Core

## What is Core Training?

Core training targets all of the muscles that stabilize the trunk. These muscles work in unison to support each other. So when there are weak muscles in your midsection, it causes an imbalance that forces the stronger muscles to pick up the slack. For this reason, all of the muscles in your torso and trunk must be equally strong to help the body perform efficiently. Some of the benefits of core training include:

- increased athletic performance
- reduced, or eliminated back pain
- reduced risk of back injury
- better posture
- improved balance
- more efficient movements
- increased power in the limbs
- more efficient transfer of energy (such as when jumping)

The only way to truly strengthen the muscles in your core is to fire them up with plenty of core training exercises. Sure, you can spend your hard-earned dollars on a bunch of “core training” equipment. But the only muscles infomercial doodads target are the ones used to dig in your wallet.

The truth is, you don’t need any of those ridiculous “seen on TV” gizmos to strengthen your core. Most of them are a complete waste of money anyway. With the right exercises, core strength can be attained without the use of novelty equipment.

Now it’s time to look at some no-nonsense exercises you can use to strengthen your core.

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The secret to success with core strength training is to stabilize your core before and during each exercise. Stabilizing the core is also called, “activating the core,” “contracting the core,” “engaging the core” and “tightening the core.” But, whatever it is called, it all refers to the same thing: maintaining a “drawn in” core during each and every exercise.

To “draw in” the core, you simply draw in (suck in) your belly button towards your spine. However, be careful not to hold your breath. With your core stabilized, you should still be able to breathe normally.

Activating your core will help stabilize your body and put it in proper alignment for your workout. It will also make the exercises more effective because each muscle will be able to be engaged properly.

You don’t have to be exercising to activate your core. You can do it throughout the day as you are working or walking to help yourself maintain good posture and improve your core muscle strength. It’s a great way to stay focused on good posture regardless of what you are doing.

So, straighten up, stop slouching, and use the exercises below to fire up your core and build a rock-solid body!

# Fire Up Your Core

**CAUTION:**  
**Consult With Your Physician Before**  
**Beginning Any Exercise Program.**

## Core Strength Exercises

### Supine Floor Bridge



**Starting Position:** Lie down, with your back flat on the floor. Bend your knees and bring your feet close to your butt. Keep your feet flat on the floor. Place your arms at your sides.



**Exercise Instructions:** Keeping your back straight, raise your hips as high off the floor as possible. As you do this, tighten your core and clench your butt cheeks. Keep your weight on your shoulders and off your neck! Hold this position as long as you can, concentrating on maintaining good form. If you lose your form, stop and start over again. Be sure to keep your knees directly above your ankles. Do not arch your back! With each repetition, try to hold the position a little longer until you can hold it for a minute or more. After a few repetitions, you should feel your glutes burning. If your hamstrings begin to cramp, stop and stretch them.

# Fire Up Your Core

## Plank



**Starting Position:** Lie on the floor, flat on your stomach. Extend your arms in front of you, keeping your forearms and elbows flat on the floor. Your elbows should be positioned below your shoulders and your forearms should remain parallel to your body.



**Exercise Instructions:** Raise your hips so your back is parallel to the floor. Hold for as long as you are able. Work up to 1 minute or more. It is very important not to arch your back; keep it straight at all times. The muscles in your abdomen and core should be doing all the work. In order for this exercise to be effective, you must contract your core muscles, butt cheeks and thighs. If you feel yourself starting to bend in the small of your back, straighten out, or stop the exercise and begin again. You must concentrate on keeping your back parallel to the floor.

# Fire Up Your Core

## Side Plank



**Starting Position:** Lie on the floor on your side with your elbow directly under your shoulder and your feet stacked on top of each other.



**Exercise Instructions:** Contract your core and butt cheeks while you press your forearm against the floor to raise your hips until your body is in a straight line from your ankles to your shoulders. Your spine should be in a straight line. Keep your abs, core and glutes tightened to maintain this straight position. Hold it for 15 to 30 seconds. Then, relax and lower your hips toward the floor and immediately straighten your body again, contracting your abs, core and glutes. Perform several repetitions, then switch to the other side.

The side plank can also be performed without moving your hips up and down. To do this, stretch your free arm above your head and hold the position with your spine in a straight line as long as possible.

**Easier Variation:** If you have difficulty performing the Side Plank, bend your legs back toward your butt and anchor yourself at your knees instead of your feet.



# Fire Up Your Core

**Supine Bridge -- Try these variations once you have basics down**



## **Leg Up Supine Bridge**

Perform the Supine Floor Bridge, as explained above. Instead of keeping both feet flat on the floor, raise one foot off the floor until it is in line with your back. Only extend your leg if you can maintain the bridge without letting your hips drop. If your hips drop, it is too soon for you to do this exercise. Continue with the Supine Floor Bridge to strengthen your core.



## **Elevated Supine Bridge**

Sit on the floor with your knees bent and adjust your feet so they are under your knees and your hands so they are under your shoulders. Raise your hips until your back is parallel to the floor and your body is in a straight line from your knees to your shoulders.



## **1-Leg Elevated Supine Bridge**

Perform the Elevated Supine Bridge as described above. When your body is parallel to the floor, raise one leg until it is also parallel to the floor. Hold this position as long as you can, keeping your body in a straight line from your foot to your shoulders.



# Fire Up Your Core

**Plank -- Try these variations once you have basics down**



## **Plank with Diagonal Arm Lift**

Raise yourself into the plank position, as described above. Keep your core and glutes contracted and raise your right arm forward and to the right so that it is pointing at 2 o'clock. Hold for 2 to 5 seconds then return your arm to its starting position. Now, do the same thing with your left arm, pointing it to 10 o'clock. Be sure to keep your elbows bent at 90 degrees and directly under your shoulders.



## **Single Leg Plank**

Raise yourself into the plank position, as described above. Keep your core and glutes contracted and lift one leg straight off the floor. Keep your leg fully extended, do not bend your knee and keep your toe pointed straight down toward the floor. Hold the position as long as you are able. Then lower your leg and repeat. After several repetitions, switch to your other leg.



## **Single Leg Plank, Abducted**

Perform the Single Leg Plank as described above. However, when you raise your leg this time, move it away from your body (abduct it). Remember to keep your leg straight with your toes pointed straight down toward the floor.

# Fire Up Your Core

**Side Plank -- Try these variations once you have basics down**



## **Side Plank on Your Hands**

Change the starting position of the Side Plank so you are propped up on your hand instead of your elbow and forearm. Keep your spine in a straight line, just as before. Then, lower your hips toward the floor and straighten back up again. Perform several repetitions, then switch to your other side.



# Fire Up Your Core



## Side Plank with Leg and Arm Raises

Change the starting position of the Side Plank so you are propped up on your hand instead of your elbow and forearm. Keep your spine in a straight line and hold that position. Do not lower your hips toward the floor. Instead, raise your free arm above your head, stay balanced and then raise your free leg. Hold this position, with your arm and leg raised for 15 or 20 seconds. With each repetition, try to hold the position longer. Switch and repeat the exercise on your other side.



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## Weighted Side Plank

This exercise is performed exactly like the regular Side Plank, except you hold a dumbbell or weight plate against your side. Remember to concentrate on your form. As you become proficient with this exercise, gradually increase the weight.





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## Other Good Core exercises

### Standard Crunch

Lie on the floor on your back with your knees bent. Place your fingers behind your ears. Now, raise your shoulders straight up off the floor toward the ceiling. Don't bend your neck toward your knees. As you lift your shoulders, tighten your core.

### Knee Up Crunch

Lie on the floor on your back with your knees bent. Perform a Standard Crunch, as described above, but as you raise your shoulders off the floor, also lift your feet off the floor and move your knees toward your chest. Perform this motion slowly. Concentrate on keeping the small of your back against the floor for the entire exercise.

### Bicycle Crunch

Lie on your back on the floor with your legs extended and your hands behind your head. Raise your legs and shoulders off the floor. Keep your right leg extended while you bend your left knee and bring it straight back toward your chest. As you bring your left leg back, touch your right elbow to your left knee. Then, straighten out your left leg while you bend your right leg and touch it with your left elbow. This should be executed in a continuous motion, but don't do it too fast. Keep your shoulder blades and feet off the floor at all times.

### Oblique Crunch

Lie on the floor on your left side with your left shoulder on the floor and your knees bent. Place your right hand behind your head and fold your left arm across your torso. Now, simultaneously raise your shoulder and feet off the floor as if you were trying to touch your elbow to your feet. You should feel your ribs pressing into your side. Concentrate on bending your body upward, not forward. Turn over on your right side and repeat.

### Side Plank Crunch

Begin in the raised position of the Side Plank with your left elbow and forearm on the floor, your feet stacked and your body in a straight line. Place your right arm behind your head. Now, twist your body and touch your right elbow to the floor. Return to the starting position and repeat. Perform several repetitions, then switch to your other side.

### Starfish Crunch

Lie on the floor on your back with your arms and legs spread widely. Raise your right arm and left leg until you can touch your shin (or come as close as you can). Now, repeat with your left arm and right leg. Alternate back and forth.

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## Half Up Twist

Sit on the floor with your knees bent. Place your hands on your knees and lean back until your arms are straight. The top half of your body should be approximately at a 45-degree angle above the floor. Cross your arms in front of you with each of your hands holding an elbow. Twist your body to the left and right, maintaining your body in the “half-up” position.

## Oblique Leg Extensions

Lie on the floor on your left side with your left shoulder on the floor and your knees bent. Place your right hand behind your head and fold your left arm across your torso. Now, extend your right leg straight out so it is in a straight line with the rest of your body. Do not let your leg touch the floor. Bend your right knee and bring it toward your head as you move your shoulders toward your knee. Then, straighten out your leg (but don't let it touch the floor) as you return your shoulders to the starting position. Repeat several times, maintaining a smooth flow of motion. Turn over on your right side and repeat.

## Scissor Cross

Lie on the floor with your hands at your sides and your legs extended. Lift your legs off the floor at about a 45-degree angle. Keeping your legs off the floor, spread them apart as far as you can. Then, bring them back together but cross your left leg over your right. Spread your legs apart again, but this time when you bring them back together, cross your right leg over your left. Continue this crisscross motion for several repetitions.

## Single Leg Lowering

Lie on your back with your legs extended straight up in the air and your arms flat on the floor against your sides. (Your legs should be in a straight line, perpendicular to the floor.) Keeping your legs straight, lower your left leg until your foot is 2 to 3 inches off the floor. Then, raise it back up. Now, repeat the same motion with your right leg. Don't point your toes when you do this exercise. Keep your foot perpendicular to your leg. Lead with your heel and focus on pushing it away from your body.

## Hip Raise

Begin this exercise like the Single Leg Lowering above, but place your arms at your sides with your palms up. Keep your legs extended straight up in the air. Slowly raise your hips off the floor and toward the ceiling, keeping your legs straight and perpendicular to the floor. Hold for a few seconds. Then lower your hips and repeat.

## Sky Reach

Begin this exercise like the Supine Floor Bridge with your back on the floor, your knees bent and your feet flat on the floor. Raise and stretch out your arms so they are



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perpendicular to the floor. Keep your arms straight and reach for the ceiling. Your back should remain straight as you lift your shoulders off the floor a few inches. Slowly return to the starting position and repeat. Variation: Instead of keeping your feet flat on the floor, point your toes upward while you keep your heels on the floor.

## **Modified Bridge March**

Assume a starting position like the Supine Floor Bridge with your hips raised, knees bent and your back in a straight line between your knees and shoulders. Rest your heels on the floor so your feet are perpendicular to your lower legs (not flat on the floor). Keep your knee bent and raise it up, toward your chest. Hold, then lower and repeat with your other leg. Concentrate on keeping your back in a straight line and do not let your hips sag.

## **3-Point Dynamic Bridge**

Begin like you were going to do a standard push up, but spread your hands and feet farther apart. Now lift and extend one of your arms. Stabilize yourself then lower your hand. Repeat lifting another arm or leg. Stabilize yourself and then lower. Continue repeating this motion, lifting a limb, stabilizing, returning. Mix up the order, but lift each limb the same number of times.

## **Quadruped**

Begin on the floor on your hands and knees. Contract your core and extend your right arm straight out in front of you keeping it parallel to the floor. At the same time, extend your left leg straight back so that it is also parallel to the floor. Hold for a few seconds then return to the starting position. Repeat the process with your left arm and right leg.

## **Overhead Clap**

Sit on the floor with your legs stretched out in front of you. Raise both of your arms straight up over your head. Now, lift your legs up several inches off the floor. Keep your legs raised for the remainder of the exercise. Lower your left arm to 9 o'clock so it is parallel to the floor, then quickly return it to its upright position, as if you were clapping over your head. Then, lower your right arm to 3 o'clock so it is parallel to the floor, then quickly return it to its upright position. This is one repetition. Repeat several times.

## **Superman**

Lie on the floor on your stomach with your arms stretched out in front of your head as if you were Superman, flying through the air). Now, raise your right arm, left leg and chest off the floor. Stretch out your leg and arm as if they were being pulled in opposite directions. Tighten your core and engage your stomach muscles. Hold this position for 2 or 3 seconds. Lower your arm and leg and repeat with your left arm and right leg.

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## **Bird Dog Extension**

Get on the floor on your hands and knees. Keep your knees directly below your hips and your hands directly below your shoulders. Your back should be parallel to the floor. Contract your core as you extend your right arm and left leg. Keep your arm and leg in a straight line with your back and stretch them out as if they were being pulled in opposite directions. Return to the starting position and repeat with your left arm and right leg.