[IMAGE]

# Fit To The Core

## Find Your Center

By Meghan Vivo

**Core Strength Training Is Not Just For Bodybuilders And Those Hoping To Flaunt Rock-Hard Abs This Summer**. Even among gym-goers and fitness enthusiasts, the core is one of the most important - but frequently neglected - areas of the body.

While a typical weight-training routine targets and "isolates" an individual muscle, a core workout "integrates" various muscles, which improves full-body strength and flexibility for the regular activities of daily life.

Your core is your center of gravity. The core muscles - the 29 muscles in your pelvis, lower back, hips and abdomen - lie deep within the torso. They generally attach to the spine, pelvis and muscles that support the scapula. Training the core region corrects postural imbalances, prevents lower back pain, improves coordination and body awareness, and reduces tension in the extremities. By contracting the core muscles, you stabilize the spine, pelvis and shoulders, and create a solid base of support for your entire body.

There’s no excuse for neglecting your core - you don’t need a gym membership or weights, and you only need a few minutes a day. Just check out these portable, versatile tools to strengthen core muscles.

Man performs ab crunch. - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark **Exercise Ball**

Exercise balls are becoming a popular workout aide because they allow for a wide range of motion and constant muscle tension. Since the ball is unstable, it forces the body to adapt to atypical positions to stabilize muscles and bring the body into alignment.

When choosing a fitness ball, size is key. As a general rule, if your hip, knee and ankle line up at approximately a 90-degree angle when you’re sitting on the ball, the ball is correctly matched to your height. When in doubt, a 55- or 65-centimeter ball will suit most people. If you’re a beginner, choose a softer, larger ball. You can start building your core using the following ball exercises recommended by the

Mayo Clinic:

**Abdominal Sit-Back**

Sit on the ball with your feet resting on the floor, about hip-width apart. Keep your back and neck straight and aligned. Fold your arms across your chest and slowly lean backward until you feel your abdominal muscles contract. Hold this position for three deep breaths and repeat.

Fitness Ball - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark When choosing a fitness ball, size is key. **Bridge**
Lie on your back on the floor with your legs resting on top of the ball. Raise your hips and buttocks off the floor into a bridge. Hold this position for three deep breaths and repeat.

**Plank**

Start out behind the ball, and rest your stomach on the ball with your feet touching the floor. Lean forward until you touch the floor with your hands and walk your hands away from the ball. Stop when you feel the ball reach your upper thighs. Keep your shoulders directly above your hands. Contract your abdominal muscles and hold the position as long as you can while maintaining your balance and form.

**Resistance Bands**

Resistance bands are portable, adaptable and inexpensive pieces of exercise equipment, ideal for stretching and core training. The bands come in various lengths and colors to signify varying resistance levels. Since resistance bands can be used at home, at the office or while traveling, the following exercises offer a convenient workout wherever you go:

**Lunges**

Stand with your feet hip-width apart and step back about 2 feet with your left leg. Place the resistance band under your front foot, bend your elbows and hold the ends with your hands. Lower into a lunge by bending at the right hip and knee until your thigh is parallel to the floor. Repeat and switch legs.

**Lateral Rows**

Resistance Bands - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark Bands come in various lengths and colors to signify varying resistance levels. Step onto the resistance band with your feet hip-width apart and knees slightly bent. Grasp the ends of the band with your palms facing each other, elbows slightly bent and arms hanging down at your sides. Raise the band to the side of your body at shoulder height and repeat.

**Diagonal Woodchop**

Loop the resistance band under your left foot and grasp the ends. Keep your hands together and extend your arms down toward the left foot. Bring the band up overhead and to the right and extend down toward the left foot in a wood-chopping motion. Your feet should remain stationary while you rotate at your trunk. Repeat and complete the motion in the opposite direction.

**Free Weights**

Bar Bell Free weights - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark Free weights help build strength by simulating real-life movements. Free weights, such as dumbbells or barbells, are an old favorite for strengthening the core. While weight machines can limit the body's range of motion, free weights more effectively build strength by simulating real-life movements and stabilizing the body. That's not to say weight machines are bad - they just don't work the core as well. Of course, proper safety precautions must be taken in order to prevent injury, particularly when using free weights.

**Sidebends**

Stand with your feet shoulder-width apart, knees slightly bent and arms holding weights nearly straight up over your head. Take a deep breath and keep your abs tight as you slowly lean to one side, as far as you can comfortably, without bending forward or backward. Exhale as you return to the center, and then repeat on the other side.

**Squats**

Hold dumbbells at your sides with your palms facing your body. Stand with your feet slightly greater than shoulder-width apart and your toes pointed forward. Slowly lower your body until your knees are at a 90-degree angle. Return to the starting position and repeat.

**Horizontal Swings**

Hold a light dumbbell in your hands. Straighten your arms in front of your body, stand with your legs wide apart and slightly bent, and rotate side to side. Start slowly to get the feel for your range of motion and gradually increase the speed to contract your oblique muscles. Align your head with your torso as you rotate.

**Core Training Done Right**

**Strive For Balance**

Prevent overloading any one muscle by choosing exercises that get multiple core muscles working at once. When you exercise a muscle on the front of the body, proceed with the corresponding exercise for the back of the body.

**Take Breaks**

If your muscle feels tired or weak, stop and move on to the next exercise. After working a certain muscle group, give your body a day between workouts to allow the muscles to recover.

Woman does situps on excercise ball. - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark **Master The Technique**

Perform all exercises in a slow, controlled way to stabilize the body and isolate the muscles. When starting a new exercise regimen, start small and build your way up to more repetitions, and take time to learn the correct technique the first time.

**Don’t Forget To Breathe**

Your blood pressure can escalate to dangerously high levels if you don’t maintain a normal breathing pattern. Fight the instinct to hold your breath during an exercise and carefully monitor your breathing.

**Get Help**

As with any exercise routine, it’s a good idea to have a fitness expert or trainer help you perfect your technique to prevent injury and ensure maximum results.

In addition to these exercises, you may want to incorporate tools such as medicine balls, wobble boards, and even Pilates and yoga programs to vary your core workout. Consult your doctor as well as a fitness specialist or athletic trainer to find the exercises that work best for you. While core training is a critical part of your workout routine, aerobic exercise and other forms of strength training also are important contributors to overall health.

The movements you make in the gym don’t always give you strength for your daily activities. Doing abdominal crunches on a weight machine may not give you the strength, balance and agility to catch yourself after a fall, lift your children or maintain proper posture at work. Real life is full of surprises. Be ready for the unexpected by giving your body the strength it needs.

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