

5 Best Exercises for a Strong Core and Healthy Body

Is your lower back hurting right now? Do you feel sore and stiff when you stand up from sitting for long periods of time?

If so, I would be willing to bet that either you haven't taken enough breaks to walk around and stretch, you haven't maintained good posture or your core is significantly weak. Perhaps all three culprits are to blame.

Today I am going to address the third possibility: a weak core. But before I do, it seems appropriate—since we aren't talking fruit or geology—to define what the fitness industry means when it uses the ubiquitous term, “the core.”

Your core muscles are the intrinsic muscles deep within the torso. These muscles attach to the pelvis and spine and include the obliques on the sides of your abdomen, the transverse abdominis in the innermost layer of your abdominal muscles, the muscles of the pelvic floor, and the broadest muscles in your back, known as the latissimus dorsi. (Gotta love Latin!)

Most of the time, your core acts as a stabilizer rather than a prime mover. (During exercises such as bicycle crunches and back extensions that isolate obliques and erector spinae, respectfully, your core is the prime mover.)

In daily life, your core muscles are what help you bend down to tie your shoes, turn to talk to someone in the passenger seat behind you, pick up a package from your front porch, even sit upright as you read this article. Everything from strenuous manual labor that involves twisting, chopping and lifting to easier mundane tasks such as talking on the phone, getting into the bathtub and working at your computer engages the core. If we want to be back pain and injury-free, not to

mention comfortable and confident in our clothes, it behooves us to train these muscles on a regular basis.

As I mentioned above, the core generally serves to stabilize our bodies during everyday tasks. Therefore, it makes sense that the best way to train the core muscles is by doing functional exercises that mimic said everyday tasks. Below are five of my favorite exercises that you can easily incorporate into your next workout. And all you need is a pair of dumbbells and your built-in core.

What I love most about these exercises is that they are compound movements, meaning they utilize more than one joint or muscle group and, therefore, burn more calories, build more muscle, provide a full-body workout faster than single-joint isolation exercises do, improve coordination and target your core without you even noticing (that last part isn't a guarantee, I should add).

I recommend starting out by doing one of the following exercises each workout; you can even include them in your warm up. Perform 3-5 sets of 10-15 repetitions, increasing weight and/or reps as you progress each week.

1. Lunges with Twist Over Lunging Knee

- Stand with feet shoulder-width apart, torso upright with arms hanging straight at your sides.
- Take a slow, controlled lunge forward with one foot. As you lunge, lower your body and allow the lunging knee to bend until your thigh is parallel to the ground.
- In the lunge position, bend your elbows at ninety degrees and rotate your torso in the direction of your bent knee.
- If performing walking lunges, push through the heel of the lunging foot to bring the back foot to meet it.

2. Mountain-Climbers

- Place your hands on the floor, slightly wider than shoulder-width. Step out with your feet to assume a plank position.
- While holding your upper body in place, alternate bringing the right and left knees toward your chest.
- Keep your hips down and increase the intensity by performing the movement faster as you feel comfortable.

3. Overhead Walking Lunges with Dumbbells

- Hold a pair of dumbbells overhead, arms fully extended with biceps by your ears. Stand with feet shoulder-width apart.
- Take a slow, controlled lunge forward with one foot. As you lunge, lower your body and allow the lunging knee to bend until your thigh is parallel to the ground. Keep arms strong and locked out overhead. Do not let elbows bend.
- If performing walking lunges, push through the heel of the lunging foot to bring the back foot to meet it.

4. Renegade Row

- Place a pair of dumbbells side by side on the floor. Then get into a plank position with hands gripping either dumbbell, feet hip-width apart. Make sure dumbbells are about shoulder-width apart.
- Bend your right elbow and pull the dumbbell until your elbow passes your torso. Keep the elbow tight and close to your body. Keep abdominals engaged and neck in a neutral position. Press the left dumbbell into the floor for balance.
- Lower your arm and repeat on the opposite side.

5. Suitcase Deadlift

- Hold one dumbbell to the side of your body. Feet are hip-width apart.
- With shoulders back, chest lifted, and lower back in a

- natural arch, begin lowering your body by pushing your hips back. Then bend your knees and continue moving your rear back while maintaining the arch in your lower back.
- The dumbbell should be lowering in a straight path in line with your shoulder blades. When you lose the natural curve in your spine and begin to round your back, stop lowering and reverse the motion.
 - To initiate the lift, use your glute muscles to powerfully thrust your hips forward. Focus on keeping your torso level and not leaning or twisting toward the dumbbell.
 - NOTE: As your flexibility and mobility increases, you can lower the dumbbell more and more until you can touch the floor. At that point, you can try beginning the movement from the floor.

For more exercises like the ones in this article, check out my book, *Perfect Fit!*

Diana Anderson-Tyler is the author of *Creation House's Fit for Faith: A Christian Woman's Guide to Total Fitness* and her latest book, *Perfect Fit: Weekly Wisdom and Workouts for Women of Faith and Fitness*. Her popular website can be found at [www.creationhousefitness.com](#), and she is the owner and a coach at CrossFit 925. Diana can be reached on Twitter.

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