

Core Exercises- Which ones should I do?

Bridging

Often overlooked as a "basic" exercise by experienced exercisers, the bridge in its various forms is a powerful tool. This fires up the deep abdominals, and strengthens the hamstrings. Perhaps its most valuable benefit is that it works the gluteus maximus (biggest of the glute muscles) at its end range, where it is usually weaker. A classic bridge involves lying on your back on the floor, with bent knees, hip width apart. Keeping your body weight on your upper back and shoulders, tighten your glutes and push your hips into the air, tightening the core. Hold for a few seconds, and release. Repeat. Other options include feet on a stability ball, a med ball, or a stability cushion.



A one-legged bridge will have the added bonus of working the gluteus medius, a very busy muscle that sits behind your hipbone and is responsible for externally rotating your hip, and helping to abduct your leg out to the side.

Rotation

Trunk rotation engages the muscles that allow you to twist to one side or another. The very basic posture exercise involves sitting on a chair with arms crossed on your chest. As you exhale, slowly twist to one side, and then to the other. A more advanced version could include a forward lunge. Hold a medium med ball or dumbbell in both hands, held out in front of you. As you lunge forward with your left leg, twist your upper body to rotate over your left leg. Return leg, and switch sides.

Seated Stabilization

A V-sit is an excellent example of a seated stabilization exercise. Sitting on the floor, with your knees bent and toes pulled up towards your knees, hold a single dumbbell or med ball in your hands. twist your trunk muscles to one side and then the other, breathing out as you do the twist and breathing in when you are centred. Maintain a hollow in your low back, and keep your chest lifted.

Supine (face-up) Stabilization

The tried-and-true exercise called Dead Bugs is a supine stabilization technique. This is a very spine-safe exercise when performed properly.

Lie on your back with your right arm flexed up and beside your head, parallel to the floor. Pull the right knee up to your chest. Your left leg is straight and off the floor; your left arm is pointing downwards towards your left foot. Brace your abs and use them to keep your back flat during the whole exercise. Slowly switch the positions of your arms and legs - right arm and leg go down, and the left side limbs go up into the first position of the right side limbs.

Other supine stabilization exercises include bridges on a stability ball, with your head on the ball - alternate slowly lifting one leg up and tightening your abs. Crunches with your spine supported by a small ball or a stability ball will be helpful, as long as you keep your spine from flexing forward - use your abs to pull your trunk forward.

Lateral Stabilization/Lateral Flexion

A side plank is a good exercise to stabilize the muscles at the sides of your waist - obliques. Keep your elbow directly under your shoulder for safety and stability, and tighten your obliques as you lift up into the side plank. Hold as long as you can maintain good form.

Lateral flexion involves bending to the side from a standing position, shortening and tightening the obliques. If you want to up the difficulty level, you can add weights to the basic exercise above, or change it up with a side-lying position on a stability ball and flexing your upper body upwards towards your hips.

Prone (Face-down) Stabilization

Exercises such as a plank and its variations are good examples of prone stabilization. The bird dog, sometimes known as an alternate lift, is another solid exercise to stabilize the core. Kneeling on all fours, with your hands directly below your shoulders, and your knees directly below your hips, tighten your core, and slowly extend one arm and the opposite leg. Hold for a moment and release. Either repeat a full set on that same arm/leg, or alternate arm/leg for a set.

Back Extensions **Note:** do not attempt back extension exercise if you have spinal stenosis, or any kind of narrowing throughout the lumbar spine.

Your back extension muscles (erector spinae, multifidus) are as critical to core stabilization as all the other muscles discussed here. However, we often have weakness there because we tend to sit, and flex our spines forward, hunched over a desk or computer.

Tighten your abdominals before doing any kind of back extension. Here's a starting point



Lie face down, with your forearms on the floor. Tighten your abs, and slowly lift one arm and the opposite leg, staying in a pain-free zone. You will feel tightness in your low back. Don't push so far back that you feel pain. Hold for a moment, and release back down to the floor again. Repeat 7-10 times.

As your strength and stability improve, you can progress to other types of back extensions, such as a deadlift, keeping your neck long and relaxed.



Note: do not attempt back extension exercise if you have spinal stenosis, or any kind of narrowing throughout the lumbar spine. Consult a physiotherapist or qualified personal trainer for spinal stabilization exercises friendly to your particular condition. Deb Bailey fitability.ca