

Core strength: Why is it important and how do you maintain it?

May 12 2021, by Andrew Lavender



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Many people have become [more sedentary](#) in recent times with lockdowns and working from home due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

If you're [moving less](#), this may have impacted your [core](#) strength. Or, you may just be thinking you need to improve it.

So, what exactly is the core? And why is it important to have good core strength?

What is the core?

The [core](#) consists of the muscles in your midsection, or torso, surrounding the spine and pelvis. This includes the [abdominal muscles](#) at the front, but also muscles within the lower back, and around your sides.

The core muscles are not considered powerful, but they play a fundamental role in stabilizing the spine and pelvis. They're also key to maintaining good posture.

These functions are important to ensure you can move your limbs easily. Your core also protects you [against injury](#)—people with a weaker core are more likely to sustain a back injury. Core [muscle](#) strengthening is often an important part [of rehabilitation](#) after a back injury.

We use our core muscles while performing daily tasks like getting up from a chair, standing, walking, vacuuming and lifting things.

The core muscles are also important for athletic activities like running, jumping, tackling and lifting weights.

Some signs you might need to work on your core

As with other muscles, if we don't use our core muscles enough, they become weak. When our core becomes weak, our movements are less supported, which can put pressure on other parts of our bodies.

Weakness in the core muscles can be associated with [lower back pain](#), particularly among older people.

Knee pain is another possible sign the core muscles are too weak. Research has shown a core strength training program with physiotherapy has [a greater effect](#) on reducing [knee pain](#) than standard physiotherapy alone.

If you haven't been exercising for a while, and you're experiencing [lower back pain](#) or knee pain, it may be a sign your core muscles have become too weak and it's time to do some work on strengthening them.



Credit: Marta Wave from Pexels

The good news is, we can improve core strength with exercise. And

there's no one exercise that is best—you can choose which approach works best for you.

If you do have back or knee pain, or have recently had a baby, consult your doctor or physiotherapist before getting started.

How to strengthen your core: some exercises you can do at home

While walking and running do involve activating the core muscles to some degree, to really target the core we can look to some specific exercises like the traditional sit-up or stomach crunch. These exercises [work well](#) to strengthen the muscles on the front of the torso and carry a very low risk of injury.

Modified versions can enhance the effects. For example, exercising on an unstable surface like a Swiss ball can increase the demands on the muscles.

Think of how much your ankle moves when you stand on one leg, for example. Being in this unstable position forces the muscles of your lower leg to work harder to keep your balance. It's similar to the way your muscles tighten up when you're walking on a slippery surface.

So, when you do sit-ups while sitting on a Swiss ball or a BOSU ball (the shape of a half sphere, like in the picture below) you find you must engage your core muscles to stay on the device. This increases the intensity of the exercise.

The traditional crunch or sit-up predominantly work the muscles [at the front of the torso](#), the rectus abdominis, commonly known as the abs.

A standard plank is also good for your abs, and engages other muscles of the torso as well. And you can engage the core muscles at the side of the torso, called the obliques, even further with a side plank.

You can also try getting into a push up position and raising one leg at a time from the hip while keeping the knee straight.

You can make this more challenging by raising the opposite arm at the same time, so your only points of contact are the ball of one foot and the other hand.

This is a good workout for your core, which is working hard to keep you in position. You can make it easier by doing this on hands and knees.

Any [exercise](#) that activates the core muscles more than usual will help improve core strength. Sit-ups, crunches and planks will target these muscles directly, and adding unstable surfaces like Swiss balls can enhance the activation.

But remember, other types of physical activity, like going for a jog or doing squats, can help your core strength too.

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