

Core Performance: 5 Training Tips

This topic has been around the block more times than the CTA's public transport. Everyone wants abs. We want them to be strong and, even more so, we want them to look amazing. Core exercises, programs and tips have been recycled again and again. So, why are you reading this article? You are reading it because if something had worked in the past and gotten you that washboard set of abs, you wouldn't be researching more information.

So, the question is simple: *How do you get a strong nice looking set of abs?*

The answer is simple. *If you don't use, you lose it.*

The various factors involved with developing lean muscle and getting a strong core range from far and few. Do not lose yourself in all of the subtle details. Ultimately, the goal of acquiring a strong nice looking core will come from select areas of focus. Here are 5 tips to improve your core:

1. Train Daily for 15 Minutes

To get better at playing the violin, you must practice the violin on a consistent basis. To improve your free throw shots, well, you have to practice free throws. So, if you want to make a change with your body by getting a strong aesthetic core, then you must train by using it daily. Be focused on what you want and do it.

Take 15 minutes every day to use your core workout as a warm up to get the day started. Be efficient with those 15 minutes. You can tap a stick of dynamite all day and nothing will happen, you bang on it once, and BANG! Be conscious and be involved with what you are doing. Work up a sweat and give a strong effort during those 15 minutes.

Those 15 minutes may seem like nothing, but by the end of the week, you will have performed 105 minutes of core training. Do it for a month and, after those 31 days, you will have spent 465 minutes training your core. That is over 7 hours! If you were to spend 30 minutes a session, twice a week, you would only have performed 4 hours of core training. Do you even train your core twice a week? Studies show the benefits of daily exercise greatly outweighing the effects of a sedentary lifestyle.

Every day pick 5 exercises and spend 3 minutes performing each of them. Continuously roll into the next exercise. Remember, you didn't become deconditioned overnight. If you want to make a change, give yourself a chance, be consistent and train your core 15 minutes daily.

2. Quality Always Trumps Quantity

Place yourself in a safe environment by focusing on what you are currently able to do in terms of exercise difficulty. The quality of how you perform the exercise is not only important for GOOD RESULTS, but more importantly it REDUCES INJURY RISK. If you're hurt, you cannot workout. If you go through the exercises performing sloppy form, then you are not getting the most out of your training.

One of the biggest influences that affects quality is breathing. *Don't hold your breath when you work out!*

There are several muscles involved in the respiratory system. These muscles not only serve as muscles of respiration, but are involved with postural control during your daily activities and performance. If you are holding your breath or not breathing correctly, your posture, form, technique, and performance will suffer. This means that you will quickly tire out and display poor performance if you cannot find a rhythm with your breathing.

Under normal resting circumstances your breathing is at baseline; when the demand for respiration increases, your rate and volume increase. As your need for respiration increases, the respiratory muscles will decrease the postural control for the immediate needs of respiration.

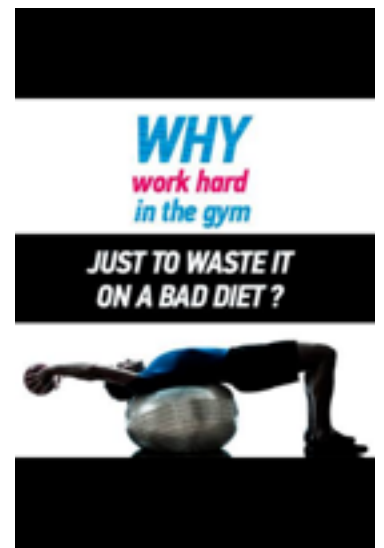
(Hodges et al, J physiol 2001; Grimstone & Hodeges, Exp Brain Res 2003)

So, as you start to “gas” and need more air, you lose control of your breathing, your respiratory muscles will give you more air, but as a result, it will worsen your posture, your form, your lifting technique, your performance, and increase your risk of injury. Therefore, stop holding your breath! Find a rhythm that matches your breathing with your activity level. “Breathe Grasshopper, just breathe....”

3. *A Good Core Starts in the Kitchen*

It doesn't take a genius to know this one, but let me elaborate. I'm not here to criticize or define what constitutes bad foods versus good foods. I think everyone has a general understanding that fresh produce and lean meats are superior in quality and health benefits than processed foods.

If you understand the correlation between food and the direct effect it has on your physical appearance and function, why is it so hard to eat the appropriate foods? Many times the difficult part of changing your diet occurs because you didn't give yourself enough time to prepare for the change. Eating healthy



is a lifestyle, not a restriction from eating double cheeseburgers and cheesecakes.

What does that mean? It means that you should take some time to figure out what you will eat and what you like to eat. Take at least 7 days to write down and evaluate what “bad foods & snacks” you have in the cabinets and refrigerator. Take another 7 days to make a list of healthy meals & recipes that seem favorable and sound good. Why would you want to eat something that tastes like cardboard? Make a list of foods you enjoy. Trust me there are endless lists of healthy choices. Make a list of 7 meals for each of the following: breakfast, lunch, dinner, and most importantly, snacks. The biggest downfall to eating healthy is not knowing what to eat for snacks. You want something quick, something that tastes good, and something on the go; well, plan for these situations with a variety of healthy snacks. If you know what to select from during these moments of the day, you are less likely to over indulge and binge eat.

So, now after 21 days, you have a list of foods in your house, a list of recipes and foods you need to have in your house, 7 different meals for breakfast, 7 different meals for lunch, 7 different meals for dinner, and 7 different types of snacks. Sounds like you did a lot in 21 days. How could you have done so in a shorter period of time without feeling overwhelmed? Take your time and prepare.

The next 7 days is where the fun begins. Toss out the “bad foods” from the list you created. Buy the foods needed for your recipes. Every day try a new recipe. If you like it, store it. If you don’t, toss it and find one to replace it.

So 28 days later, you are 1 week into eating differently than you have in the past. You have an armory of recipes, an ammunition of good foods in the house, and, most importantly, a plan to eating healthy. You will know what you are going to eat for breakfast, lunch, dinner, and snacks. Eat foods you enjoy. Continue eating and try more recipes. Give yourself time to prepare and win the battle with better food selections.

4. Reduce Injury Risk

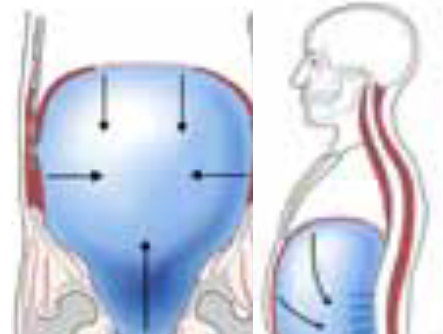
In order for you to be able to obtain that strong set of washboard abs, you need to exercise consistently. Be able to exercise consistently by staying injury free. Remember *tip #2*, quality over quantity. By ensuring you are properly performing the exercise you reduce the risk of injury. Reduce the risk of injury by bracing the core when you exercise, rather than flexing the abs. This provides low back stability. Stability is required prior to movement, otherwise, you may end up straining your back.

Picture this analogy: think of guide wires on the radio tower. The wires tend to be supporting the tower from the ground with a wide base. If the base were to be narrowed, the tower would be less stable. Now, think of your spine. If you expand your core, you are widening the base of support for your spine, but if you draw your belly button in (sucking your stomach), you are decreasing your stability.

Proper intra-abdominal pressure is what is termed “**Bracing**” of the core. Bracing is not flexing your abdominals, it is not remaining tense throughout your movements; **Bracing is creating air pressure in the midsection as you breathe properly.** The goal is to achieve 360 degrees of expansion in the midsection. Therefore, when you breathe you expand the front, sides, and back of the core as well.

If you don't mind, let us get nerdy. Bracing consists of 3 interdependent systems:

1. Bone & ligament structures (buckles 20lb force into full flexion)
2. Muscles for self- bracing (10-30% of bracing provides segmental stability of spine)
3. Brain control (coordinates expected and unexpected movements as it integrates balance)



(Image Source: Rehabilitation Prague School. Dynamic Neuromuscular Stabilization. Standardized Handouts “A”, Part 2. Assessment of the Integrative Spinal Stabilization System: DNS

Panjabi 1995, McGill 2000, Barr 2005, Vleeming 2012

So, what does that mean? It means that in order to move, you need spinal stability. The more complex or more resistance that is introduced to the movement, the more stability is required. Bracing (intra-abdominal pressure) gives you spinal stability. **Bracing provides a foundation for maximum loads, maximum weight-bearing, optimal joint positioning, and a safe environment for the low back in any type of activity.**

Practice bracing by pressing your fingers into your core; as you inhale, your fingers should be pushed out, as you exhale, your fingers should be able to press deeper towards the midsection.

Stay safe, stay strong, and practice bracing of the core.

5. If it's Important to You, Make Time for it

This is the simplest piece of advice, and yet, it is the most beneficial tip of the article. You cannot be mad at the results you get for the work you didn't do. If you want to get a strong set of nice looking abs, you have to put in the time and effort. Everyone has 24 hours in a day, so *finding* time is impossible; *Make time* for what you feel is important.

Someone once told me, “Don’t ever let the place you start dictate where you finish.” The message is clear. When you are ready to get that strong aesthetic core, prepare, put in the time and effort, and most of all, stay ambitious.

Remember, the next few months will go by no matter if you work out or not. Get Started, Get Results, and Get the Core You’ve Always Wanted!

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Latest Favorite Quote: “Knowing is not enough, **We must APPLY.** Willing is not enough, **We must DO.** ” - (Bruce Lee)