IT'S EASY!: Discover The Secrets to Stay Fit, Active, Young and Healthy

WOMEN'S fitness & HEALTH

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❖ by Simone DE CUNHA

At the Core of things

Are you an avid reader of fitness related material? Have you come across the words core stabilisation yet? As the fitness industry diversifies and specialises fitness enthusiasts and personal trainers alike are empowering themselves more than ever with knowledge and, hopefully practice.

A re-emerging trend, in the past reserved for dancers, gymnasts and most other athletes, is to learn to activate and train the core muscles, found deep in the trunk or mid-section of the body. The theory being that with strength in the core which works as the main frame for the limbs, injuries could be lessened or prevented and overall sporting performance would be improved. Today, core stabilisation, functional exercise, balance-related activity, injury prevention, and good posture have become an essential focus of the health and fitness industry.

What is Core Stability?

Core stability refers to stabilisation of the deep abdominal muscles that work in conjunction with the lower back muscles to protect the spine, provide structural support for vital organs and give the base from which all actions of the limbs are controlled and stabilised. Core strength is best achieved when the body is placed in an unstable environment. Strength in the core is important for all of us, whether young or old, and especially for women during pregnancy. As the abdominal muscles are stretched during pregnancy, a foundation of

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strength in this region will help protect the lower back and keep good posture as the baby grows.

Most abdominal exercises prescribed in fitness programs target the outer or superficial layer of muscles, muscles that can be seen (the six pack!). Examples being abdominal crunches and sit ups. Without dismissing the importance of these muscles and these exercises, emphasis needs to also be placed on activating the deeper layer or the transverse abdominal region, as these muscles act as our body's foundation and are often overlooked.

What Can you do to Strengthen your Core?

Yoga and Pilates

Over the last few years this training has taken off and with good reason. Both practices provide the devotee with strength but without bulk, improved posture, grace and balance and particularly with yoga, a union between body and mind. In relation to the core, yoga postures or asanas, which have been practiced since around 3000 BC, require total body strength that stems from the mid-section to help perform - try doing a headstand without a strong core. Pilates, created by Joseph Pilates in the 1920s, became popular with dancers in New York during the 1940s for conditioning and to rehabilitate after injury. Pilates is functional and works deep muscles to achieve efficient and graceful movement while keeping mental and physical states working in balance. The movements are natural with a particular focus on strength in the postural muscles.

Get on the Ball!

One of the most popular and functional pieces of apparatus has shown its popularity in recent years, and today you will find it in most fitness facilities. Called the Swiss ball, fit ball or stability ball, depending on whom you talk to, these colourful balls have a myriad of uses. Invented by an Italian manufacturer in 1963, physiotherapists have sworn by the Swiss Ball's benefits in practice for some time now. Factors that can be improved through Swiss ball training are flexibility, stability, balance, circulation, agility, strength, and coordination, to name a few. One interesting discovery is the improvement in nervous system activation this means that the core strength you develop in your training program used in real life situations, whether sport related or everyday activities.

This translation to real life activities is what sets core stability training apart from other forms of training. Most of our time, unless we are elite athletes training for a large part of each day, is spent performing everyday actions, or compound movements where muscle groups move in synergy rather than isolation. Because muscle groups work together and provide support to one another to perform the movement for the required action, the key is to include functional exercise within an exercise program.

Core boards, medicine balls and foam rollers are some of the other tools that can be used to aid this type of training.

The Swiss ball comes in three sizes, 55cm, 65cm and 75cm, and the size best for you will depend on your height and body stature. Generally, not taking into account limb length and proportions, those between 5ft 4in and 6ft 1in will be most comfortable and correctly positioned on a 65cm ball, those shorter on a 55cm and taller on a 75cm. The purchasing of a correctly sized and manufactured ball is very important, and in this situation cheapest is definitely not best!

Once you start adding stability based training to your exercise program in whatever form you prefer, you will see how quickly it will improve other activities in your life, not to mention a rise in energy levels. Seeking the help of a qualified personal trainer experienced in core stability would be highly beneficial before taking on a training program. Or if yoga or pilates are more your thing, look around, research, try a few, and find a teacher you feel comfortable with and who treats your wellbeing as their number one priority. F

Two good tests for core stability:

1. Stand straight and lift one leg bending the knee and hug it into the chest and hold. How well you balance in this position is a good indication.
2. Using a Swiss ball, sit on it with legs at 90 degrees to the floor, arms out away from the ball and lift one leg at a time. Concentrate on engaging in the lower abdominal muscles to hold you in position, tucking in the pelvis and pressing belly button into the spine. Careful to not drop onto the opposite hip for support.

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