

Core and Balance/Stability Training

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The last few years have seen two hot topics in fitness: core training and balance/stability training. The “core” consists of many different muscles that run the entire length of the trunk and torso. It includes the abdominals, pelvis, gluteals and certain back muscles. When they contract, they stabilize the spine, pelvis and shoulder girdle and create a solid base of support. The goal of core stability is to maintain a solid foundation and transfer energy from the center of the body out to the limbs. The muscles of the core make it possible to stand upright and move on two feet. These muscles help us control movements, shift body weight, balance, stop and start, and move in any direction. A strong core distributes the stresses of weight-bearing and protects the back. It is weak and unbalanced core muscles that are linked to low back pain. They result in a loss of the appropriate lumbar curve and a swayback posture. Appropriate posture and reduced strain on the spine can be maintained by stronger, balanced core muscles. Training the muscles of the core also corrects postural imbalances that can lead to injuries.

The biggest benefit of core training is to develop functional fitness, which is essential to both daily living and regular activities. While traditional training involved pushing or pulling weight to make a muscle bigger, today’s functional training strengthens core muscles to maintain performance and decrease injuries. This method uses exercises that mimic the body’s natural movement and that build a strong core, the central source of balance and movement. To be effective, however, all muscle groups need to be targeted.

The most effective way to strengthen your core is by incorporating an unstable surface into your routine. This forces you to engage the muscles in your abdominals, as well as making all of your muscles work harder. You could use a stability ball, a Bosu ball, balance boards, discs, or wobble boards as equipment. For example, if you’re doing push-ups with your hands on a stability ball, your chest, shoulders, biceps, abs and back all have to kick into high gear. If you’re standing on a Bosu, your quads, glutes, and hamstrings all switch on to help you balance.

These techniques are most often associated with strength training, although balance tools can be incorporated into cardio workouts. Think about trying this: instead of doing bicep curls with both feet on the ground, do them standing on one foot or standing on a Bosu. You’ll feel your legs, glutes, and abs pitch in to help finish the set and keep you stable. As you work your way into using stability balls, Bosus, and balance disks, you’ll notice how quickly all your body parts, particularly your abs, begin to change.

Every aspect of movement requires strength and balance. Each time we bend over, or even go up the stairs, our bodies are working to keep us upright. By improving balance and core strength, we help protect our muscles and joints against injury, both now and as we age. With winter sports well under way, consider the demanding balance movements involved in snow boarding and skiing. The skills you need for these activities can be developed by incorporating core conditioning exercises and stability tools into your workout.