

Build Core Strength for a Healthier Body

Pick up any health or fitness magazine and you're bound to see at least one article about the importance of "core strength." For many people, that term is synonymous with having strong, well-defined abdominal muscles, the so-called "six pack" that is so coveted by everyone from the Hollywood star to the weekend athlete.

But according to Dr. Kevin Walsh, a non-operative sports medicine physician at Bryn Mawr Hospital, the abdominal muscles only make up a small part of the core.

"The core consists of at least 10 different muscle groups that stabilize the spine and pelvis and run the entire length of the torso," says Walsh. "Abdominal muscles get all the credit for protecting the back and being the foundation of strength, but in reality they have a very limited and specific action. That's why I tell people that building core strength requires more than doing a lot of ab exercises."

According to Walsh, strengthening all of the core muscles is important for overall orthopedic health. He likens a strong core to the supporting structure of a bridge.

"The muscles of the core provide a solid foundation for the rest of the body," he says. "These muscles make it possible to stand upright, control movements of the extremities, shift body weight and move in different directions. A strong core also protects the back from injury and allows the body to handle the stress of bearing weight."

Walsh says that training the muscles of the core can correct postural imbalances that lead to injuries. This is especially important for office workers and people who sit at computers all day, jobs that often lead to poor posture and back problems.

"Weak and unbalanced core muscles are linked to low back pain and can result in a loss of the appropriate lumbar curve and a 'swayback' posture. Strong, balanced core muscles help maintain appropriate posture and reduce strain on the spine."

Workouts that help develop core strength include exercises on a stability ball, work with medicine balls, balance boards and Pilate's exercise programs. Yoga is also an excellent way to build core strength. Walsh recommends adding exercises to strengthen the core to a well-rounded workout routine.

"The biggest benefit of core training is the development of functional fitness," says Walsh. "That is, fitness that is essential to both daily living and regular activities."