

# Reversing the Aging Process

## Part II - Getting to the CORE of the Problem

Prompted by the response from our recent article on aging (“Reversing the Aging Process: In Search of the Healthy Grail,” *Attitudes Magazine*, January 2006), this follow-up focuses on a concept called “functionality,” which is the ability to perform (without the risk or fear of injury or long-term health problems) those fundamental, day-to-day activities that allow us to live a healthy, productive, and self-sufficient life, such as:

- Climbing stairs.
- Carrying groceries into our home.
- Getting in and out of vehicles.
- Lifting our children and grandchildren.
- Simply standing and walking.

Currently, the United States spends \$100 billion annually on spine care — with 80 percent of health care patients suffering from functional back pain. And while some of those patients receive help from medical specialists or physical therapists, most simply “live (suffer!) with the pain.” So, taking steps to stay “functional” is not only important to those who are concerned with their athletic performance, it is essential to all of us (of whatever age) who want to maintain the benefits of a quality, pain-free life. The answer to maintaining this “functionality” lies in the strength of our “core.”

For literally centuries, the Greeks and Chinese have been telling us that the body’s power to safely and efficiently control and balance our body’s movements comes from the body’s center — its core. This core is made up of those deep abdominals and back muscles that are attached to our spine, ribs, shoulder blades and pelvis. They stabilize our body and allow it to perform not only our chosen athletic activities, but also the simple functions of every day living. And current research tells us that training focused on our “core functional strength” will benefit both athletic and daily life performance.

The key is to find those exercises that help us stay functionally balanced and stable. The type of training needed for our core muscles is different from the type of training for other muscles. Since the core muscles do work in tandem and in support of our other muscles, the recommended exercises should involve the whole body. The best exercises are those that:

- Involve both balance and stability,
- Require the core muscles to maintain

correct alignment while the arms or legs move,

- Exercise the lower back and the abdomen in unison, and
- Are performance-specific and as applicable to real life movements as possible.

Before we look at some of the core training options available, let’s make sure you are ready to start this training. If you have not been exercising on a regular basis, you should check with your doctor and let him or her know what you plan to do. And even if you have been exercising regularly, if you suffer any back or neck pain, it would be best to see a doctor before you start any type of core training.

Now, here are some of the core training options available to you:

- Resistance weight training, which focuses on the core muscles. This training may not be available at every gym in the area, so make sure the gym is experienced in this type of training and has equipment that is adapted to core training.
- Yoga and Pilates.

In order to get the full benefit of the training and avoid possible injury, the weight training, yoga and Pilates should be done only under the supervision of an experienced personal trainer.

If none of these options are available to you or simply don’t appeal to you, there are exercises you can do on your own. Some of the more practical exercises that will also allow you to enjoy the outdoors are biking, skating and roller blading. Other core exercises involve the use of stability balls, medicine balls, and foam rolls. All of these exercises involve balance, which is a key to developing core stability. However, if these exercises are new to you, you should first spend some time learning proper form and technique from an experienced personal trainer.

If you want to know where you stand on your core strength, there is a relatively simple test you can take in the privacy of your home. The test will take less than five minutes and all you will need is a flat surface (preferably carpeted) and a watch. You’ll want to wear loose clothing and some type of workout shoes (tennis shoes, etc.). Here’s what to do:

- Position the watch on the ground where you can easily see it.
- Lie on your stomach and assume the position as shown in the accompanying picture — pressing up with your elbows on the floor.
- Tighten your core (abdominal and back)

muscles. Your head, neck, back and legs should form a straight line, like a plank of wood, therefore, this is called the “front plank position.”

- Gaze down at the floor.
- Hold this position for 60 seconds.
- Lift your right arm off the ground .
- Hold this position for 15 seconds.
- Return your right arm to the ground and lift the left arm off the ground.
- Hold this position for 15 seconds.
- Return your left arm to the ground and lift the right leg off the ground.
- Hold this position for 15 seconds.
- Return your right leg to the ground and lift the left leg off the ground.
- Hold this position for 15 seconds.
- Lift your left leg and right arm off the ground.
- Hold this position for 15 seconds.
- Return your left leg and right arm to the ground.
- Lift your right leg and left arm off the ground.
- Hold this position for 15 seconds.
- Return to the original “front plank position.”
- Hold this position for 30 seconds

If you are successful in completing this exercise, then you have good core strength. Keep up whatever you are doing to stay that way, and repeat the core strength test periodically to make sure you are on target. However, if you were not able to complete the test, it’s time to look into some type of core training. After you get into your training, repeat the test in order to monitor your progress.

**Good luck in starting and continuing your core training. And remember, this is not just about reaching your core strength, it is about maintaining it for the rest of your healthy, productive, self-sufficient life.**

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