

# Your inner core holds the secret to a better posture

By Carol Westmorland champion cyclist and Pilates instructor



So many people speak about core strength and stability without really knowing what it means.

For many years I enjoyed teaching one-off workshops to mixed ability groups. I discovered that the principles of core stability were misunderstood. I found it fascinating to realise there was a thirst for information. They wanted to know the answers and put it all into practice. Once the logic is understood it is easy to incorporate awareness into everyday.

One of the easiest ways to understand core stability is to link it to posture. Try sitting on the floor with your feet flat, hips and knees aligned.

Then lengthen your spine towards the ceiling whilst keeping your shoulders back and down and chin lifted.

Just sitting in this posture can be demanding enough for some however, if you then begin to tilt back, very slightly, whilst keeping your spine lengthened, shoulders back and down and chin lifted you will start to feel activity.

In the past this posture and the 'recline' often got included in abdominal work but at the cost of the very aim intended.

You will notice that as you



recline, you will begin to feel your body trying to support itself. Correct core work will tighten your abdominals in this posture without causing you to feel discomfort elsewhere. You should feel your entire mid-section work and that includes your back.

Tilt fractionally further back and place your palm against your middle. You will start to feel a push against your hand and it is this bit that is misunderstood. Most people believe this is a positive thing when in fact you are, at this point, not training your inner core any longer. You will no longer have good posture. Instead you are training your abdominals to stick out or as I like to say, 'explode'. You can get a similar effect doing sit-ups incorrectly.

Pilates works from the inside out; meaning there should be no outward change. When standing, sitting or laying down your alignment should be neutral. It often means that to begin with your movement is very slight to avoid overload.

Lean bodies can have wonderful definition when the core is strong but on the whole most would settle for a flatter stomach and great posture; which is Pilates aim.

Your core is a network of deep muscles that stabilises your mid-body. They include your abdominals and pelvic floor. For women, they function like an internal, old fashioned girdle. They also hold the key to that long, lean, supermodel look so many women crave.

The trouble is that most of us

lead a sedentary life sitting at a desk or sat in a car, which weakens and misaligns the muscles of the core. Try sitting without a chair back and you will notice the effort it takes to sit up naturally. Add to that the effect that having a baby has on your core muscles and you can see why core strength is so important to women.

With a strong core you will have a preventative measure in place to support your back, greater mobility, and a cinched-in waist. Over time, your body will be better aligned and will work with you.

When your core is switched on you stand tall, with your shoulders back and down and pelvis tucked under and your stomach strong and flat. In turn, this strengthens and firms your

thighs, bottom, arms and legs. Your entire body looks and feels better.

If you are unable to get to a class that strengthens your core muscles, you can try the simple but effective exercises below – designed to get you started.

### Picture 1 – The Hundred

Lie flat on your back with your knees bent and your shoulders and upper back relaxed. Raise your knees towards you until your thighs make a 90-degree angle with your torso then, raise your feet until your lower legs are in a table-top position. Pulse your arms by your sides to a count of a hundred whilst keeping your breath rhythmic.

### Picture 2 – Shoulder Bridge

Lie on your back with your feet flat on the floor knees and hips aligned.

Tilt your pelvis back to engage your core. Breathe in and, as you breathe out, peel through your spine from your hips until your torso is in a straight, sloping line from your ribs to knees. Hold for four seconds, breathe in and slowly print your spine to the floor again as you breathe out. Repeat ten times.

### Picture 3 – The Plank

Lie on your front with your elbows under shoulders, forearms flat on the floor. Breathe in and lift the body, supported by toes elbows and forearms, keeping your body in a 'plank' position keeping your neck long and head in line. Hold for ten seconds, then relax and sit back on your heels for five seconds with your arms outstretched and forehead on the floor. Repeat the plank six times.

## Here are my top 10 walks and, well, maybe a few more

In the last few weeks, I've twice been asked to come up with some of my Cumbrian "fell favourites" – first for a walking magazine that I write for and then for a website.

The first one wasn't too taxing – what's your favourite Lakeland fell? ...

From a personal point of view, it has to be Knott in the Northern Fells. Whenever I can't get out on the fells or if I'm away from home for a long time, it's the place I pine for the most. From an aesthetic perspective though, it has to be Blencathra, which always has me totally transfixed whenever I drive past it on the A66.

Then I was asked to provide my top 10 favourite walks for

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Of course, there's Knott – approached from the Longlands fells. Or maybe coming at it from Brae Fell's long, grassy ridge is better? Ooh, but then, if you come at it from the east, you've got that marvellous view of Skiddaw...

So, that's one walk. (Or is it three?)

I adore long summer days out on the big Lake District horseshoes – Fairfield, Coledale, Newlands, Deepdale, Martindale, Mosedale. One mountain after

another, with views changing all the time.

So, how many am I on?

A couple of summers ago, I discovered what has to be one of the best ridge walks in the whole of England – from Clough Head to Dollywaggon Pike, taking in Helvellyn along the way.

Another contender for best ridge walk has to be Crinkle Craggs, Bow Fell and Esk Pike. Now, maybe that's my favourite...?

I'm not much of a scrambler, but I do love to haul myself up the occasional rocky ridge from time to time. Routes on Wetherlam and Swirl How spring to mind as having been particularly enjoyable, and I really loved Long Stile on High

Street too. But some of my favourite walks are ones where I've come across something unexpected, such as the two red deer stags I surprised on beautiful Beda Fell.

And let's not forget the North Pennines. Cross Fell always makes for a wonderful day out.

What about High Cup Nick? Now, that's a wonderful spot! Then there's Wild Boar Fell, Nine Standards Rigg, the Howgills...

And what about those hidden gems that Cumbria has in abundance? Great Asby Scar, Quarry Beck near Brampton, Miterdale, the Blawith Fells, Grune Point, Knipe Moor, Comb Crag on the River Irthing...

Have I got 10 yet?

