



Everything You Need to Build a Strong Core

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RUNNERS SPEND A lot of time searching for the perfect training plan that combines easy runs, speed workouts, and rest days to keep building their fitness. Most plans also include a day or two listed as cross-training, which we use as an opportunity for additional cardio.

If we instead dedicated time to strength training, specifically in our core, we'd reduce the chance of injury, increase our speed, and run more efficiently. In the last decade as a running coach, I've helped runners through hip pain, runner's knee, lower back pain, and IT Band Syndrome, which nearly every physical therapist I consult with has correlated with a weak core.

A weak core doesn't just mean a weak six-pack (a.k.a. the rectus abdominis). Your core encompasses the trunk of your body, which is 29 pairs of muscles including those that lie deeper in your center, like the transverse abdominis, internal obliques, pelvic floor, and the muscles along the spine, like the erector spinae. Your glutes, hip flexors, lats, and traps are part of the core, too. Anatomy aside, this is a reminder that our core requires more than a few crunches.

A strong core means that your glutes can help keep your knees in proper alignment when you run, preventing knee and ankle pain. It means your back has the endurance to maintain good posture even as you fatigue on longer runs so you can sustain pace and form. A strong core also allows your hips to remain level with each foot-fall, reducing force down the leg and, therefore, helping to decrease the risk of overuse injuries.

Going back to basic movement patterns, focusing on body weight only, is an outstanding way to build the mind-body connection and increase core strength. Body-weight exercises provide plenty of resistance to challenge key muscles. Although, as noted in the gear guide (see p.50), I'm a fan of adding resistance bands to increase intensity.



THE EXPERT

AMANDA BROOKS

◀ Amanda Brooks has logged 26,000-plus miles in her 20 years of running. She is a United Endurance Sports Coaching Academy-certified running coach and an ACE-certified personal trainer. Since 2012, Amanda has worked with over 200 runners individually and thousands more through online group programs on her website, RunToTheFinish.

Ideally, your training plan should include at least two full-body strength sessions per week—every exercise will engage the core somewhat—and up to two additional core-focused sessions. But schedules are rarely ideal, so even 10 minutes of core work done consistently will have benefits.

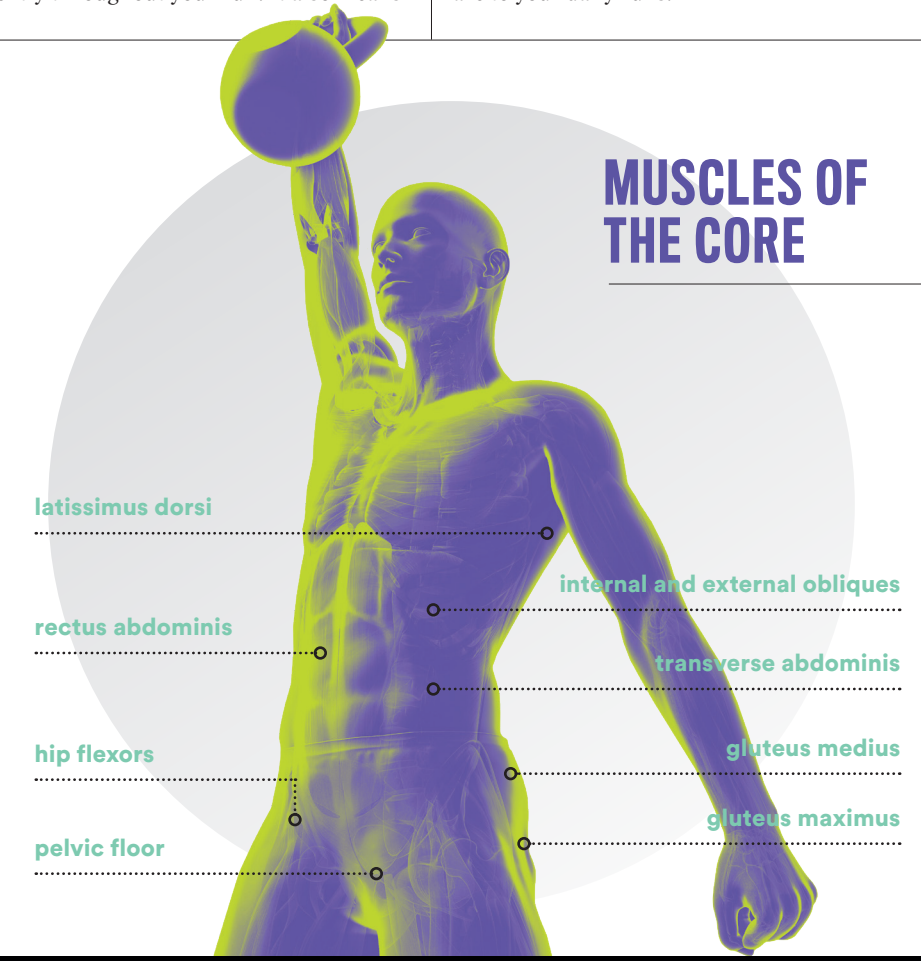
Knowing my athletes are busy people, I created a daily 10-minute program called the 30-Day Core Challenge. My goal is to provide runners with a specific set of moves so they're not overwhelmed by where to start and can simply dedicate time before every single run to work the abs, hips, and glutes.

Adding moves to your existing warm-up stimulates your muscles so they work more efficiently throughout your run. It also means

you're less likely to skip the core work when your to-do list is already overloaded.

When first adding core workouts to your schedule, you might struggle to hold a plank for 30 seconds or complete 10 reps of a movement. That's normal and simply a reminder to stay consistent. Focus on mastering the basic movements, and you'll build more power than if you progress without making the connection between the exercise and the muscles you should feel firing during that move.

After just a couple weeks of core workouts, most runners notice increased stability in their stride and less deterioration of their running form as they fatigue. And those changes make it easier to stay as committed to your core as you are to your daily runs.



MUSCLES OF THE CORE

MUST-HAVE GEAR FOR BUILDING A STRONG CORE

GAIAM REVERSIBLE YOGA MAT (6 MM) / \$40

This mat provides a little cushion when you're doing movements with a knee or elbow on the ground, yet it's firm enough to prevent you from sinking in too much. For more protection, fold the mat over. When you're comfortable, it helps you remain consistent with the work.

TRIGGERPOINT GRID 1.0 FOAM ROLLER / \$35

Post-run, use the Grid 1.0 foam roller to work through tight areas in the glutes and hips, which might be restricting your range of motion.

PERFORM BETTER FIRST PLACE MINI BANDS / \$9

A resistance band is an essential tool for many hip and glute activation movements. This four-pack, with each durable band offering a different resistance, is part of every dynamic warmup my athletes do, including fire hydrants and plank taps that fire up the core before we run.

BOWFLEX SELECTTECH 552 DUMBBELLS / \$399

Your core needs progressive overload in workouts to see ongoing progress. Grab an easy-to-grip pair for adding to exercises like side bends and sit-ups. These adjustable dumbbells save a ton of space and provide you with settings from 5 to 52.5 pounds so you can increase the resistance as you build strength and stamina.

TRIDEER EXTRA THICK YOGA AND EXERCISE BALL / \$33 AND UP

Incorporating an exercise ball is an easy way to actively challenge the core, whether you sit on the ball or do sit-ups or glute bridges. This heavy-duty, non-slip option comes in five diameters, from 38 to 85 centimeters. The smaller the ball, the more challenging it will make each exercise.



Side Plank Leg Raise

Holding a side plank for 30 seconds is a good start, but adding additional movement increases your core stability and muscle engagement.

MUSCLES TARGETED / Transverse abdominis, obliques, gluteus medius, and other hip abductors

HOW / Place your left forearm on the ground perpendicular to your body, with legs extended in a line. Press your forearm and bottom foot into the ground, and raise your hips so your body forms a straight line. With obliques and glutes engaged and hips high, raise your right leg a few inches or more (to maintain core engagement), then lower. Repeat the leg raise 5 to 10 times, then switch sides and repeat.



Alternating Arm and Leg Plank

A standard plank engages your core, but if you have that down, you will benefit more from finding stability while moving. Instead, look to dynamic plank movements that engage more muscles and benefit you on the run.

MUSCLES TARGETED / Transverse abdominis, obliques, glutes, lower back, quads, and shoulders

HOW / Place both hands on the ground in line with shoulders, extend legs back, and place feet shoulder-width apart. Focus on engaging your entire trunk from abs to glutes. Raise your right arm and left leg, hold for a breath, and return to plank position. Your body should remain in a straight line, without dropping to one side. Repeat the movement on the other side, raising your left arm and right leg. Aim to complete 10 reps per side.



Hip Bridge March

To progress beyond raising up into a simple hip bridge, add in a march to fire up the glutes prior to a run.

MUSCLES TARGETED / Gluteus maximus, rectus abdominis, lower back, and hamstrings

HOW / Lie faceup with your feet flat on the floor and knees bent. Place arms by your sides with fingertips reaching toward heels. Pressing into your heels, raise your hips toward the ceiling to create a straight line from your neck to knees. Once you feel stable, raise your left foot a few inches or more (to maintain core engagement) off the ground, place it back down, then raise your right foot, and place it back down. Keep your hips from rocking. Repeat the march 10 times per side.