

Why Crunches Don't Work

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Ever thought “I need to strengthen my core”? What’s the first exercise that comes to mind? The one you see in gyms, videos and fitness magazines?

Crunches. Well, guess what? Crunches are doing nothing to benefit your core, and they may even be contributing to a common core injury that causes belly poochiness and back pain.

How could this be? To understand how crunches actually damage your core musculature, first you need to understand what your *core* is. It is a trendy term that gets thrown about a lot these days. People think of the most visible part of the abdomen—the six pack muscles (*rectus abdominis*—see diagram pg. 4) when they think of their core. But your core is actually an interwoven system of many different muscle groups that surround and protect your internal organs, from your ribs front and back all the way to the underside of your pelvis. To think of it as a grocery bag or rectangular box is too simplistic and doesn't convey the true structure of your core—it's more like a woven basket of muscles protecting and containing your internal organs that's also woven around your spine and pelvis. The interconnected nature of the core musculature is the best indicator of the proper way to strengthen it—by using movements that recruit all of the muscles of the core at once.

Crunches were developed by well-meaning exercise enthusiasts to modify the full sit-up and came into popularity in the early 1980s. The goal was to utilize the *rectus abdominis* (*recti*) in its job of flexing the spine forward while leaving out the use of the hips and glutes—the theory being that isolating the muscle worked it better. Unfortunately, that isolation left out the *recti*'s *other* functions of supporting the organs and limiting rotation in the lumbar spine. If you target and activate only one muscle group at the expense of the rest of the core, you only over tighten the *recti* and create tremendous imbalance in that interwoven system that affects your shoulders, hips, wrists, and knees in some very negative ways.

Your core is the center of all your movement and strength, so you need to train it holistically and synergistically by moving all the muscles in tandem. Functional movement is the ideal training tool for core musculature, and the most important “mover” in your core is your *transversus abdominis*. It wraps like a girdle around your entire mid-section, and as you inhale, it moves away from the spine. As you exhale, *transverse* moves toward the spine. All of your major core muscles are connected at the *linea alba*, the central ligament that runs down the middle of the *recti*, so when you move your *transverse*, you are moving all the muscles of the core. *Transverse* is responsible for things like sneezing, coughing, pushing in childbirth and going to the bathroom.

When you consciously pull your navel toward the spine, you are activating your transverse muscle and using the core correctly to support your everyday movement.

Ever lifted weights? Then you know that to strengthen a muscle, you shorten and tighten it repeatedly. A bicep curl recruits the biceps in the upper arm, so as you pull the dumbbell up to your shoulder, you are shortening and tightening those muscles. Then you control the release back down to a straight arm, finishing the curl. The problem with crunches is that they lengthen the muscle fiber and push out to tighten, straining that central ligament (*linea alba*) of your abs in the process. In fact, crunches and any other backlying exercises that take the shoulders off the ground will create or worsen a common injury called diastasis recti, which means that the rectus abdominis muscle has become separated. This separation can be caused by any or all of these things:

1. Incorrect muscle movement,
2. Internal pressure from either a pregnancy or the daily pressure of growing intra-abdominal fat (think “beer belly”),
3. Daily arching of the back, flaring of the ribs or other severe abdominal stretches.

The reality is it’s not just crunches that damage your core. Any back-lying exercise that takes the shoulders off the floor will train imbalance into the core and create forward forceful pressure in the abdomen, creating or worsening a diastasis recti. Remember—crunches create tightness not strength.

The good news is that deep core contractions like those utilized in Tupler Technique® recruit the entire core synergistically—without straining your neck or back. You can achieve your goal of a strong, balanced core. The four steps of Tupler Technique® can get you there.

That tummy most moms get after having a baby isn't what it seems.

Could a diastasis be causing your mummy tummy?

Pregnancy naturally separates a mother's outermost abdominal muscles to make room for her growing baby. Called a diastasis, this core injury is very common and doesn't usually close up on its own. When the muscles separate, the connective tissue that joins them stretches sideways. The mummy tummy is the protruding organs against this thin connective tissue.

Maternal Fitness Montana is your diastasis rehab specialist.



Diastasis Recti
"The Mummy
Tummy"



After
Tupler
Technique™

Attend a Lose Your Mummy Tummy seminar to learn the Tupler Technique™; a groundbreaking set of simple abdominal exercises that decrease the diastasis and result in a smaller waist, firmer, flatter belly and a reduction or elimination of back pain...no matter when you had a baby. Even if it was decades ago. Learn more at www.maternalfitnessmt.com.

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The Muscles of the Core

