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Total Body Workout With Planks

By Dr. Mercola | October 20th, 2017

They make look easy, and may even seem easy at first, but when you start working on planks, you'll find some of the greatest benefits come from the process of checking yourself to make sure you're maintaining the correct form. Plus, planks are a welcome alternative to crunches and situps, which can cause back pain when your backbone is pressed against the floor. They not only give your six-pack more definition and "up" your endurance level, planks provide an array of additional benefits for your entire body.

Certainly not least, one of the most inviting aspects of this basic exercise is that it accomplishes several things at the same time, and increasing your regimen can be done at your own pace; the effort is never wasted. According to Healthline, planks not only activate more muscles, they also help:

- Provide balance and stability
- Tone abs and define your "six-pack"
- Build a stronger core
- Alleviate back pain
- Develop better posture

Why Do Planks? Studies Show Dramatic Scoliosis Improvements

At Columbia College of Physicians and Surgeons in New York, researchers noted that nonsurgical treatments for realigning spinal problems such as scoliosis, which affects 6 million to 9 million people in the U.S., are used frequently, but evidence of which options work best is lacking.

The disorder "can be painful and can affect gait, posture and other areas of physical functioning, measurably lowering self-esteem," the study notes, with nonsurgical treatments usually involving muscle relaxation or ligament stretching. Specifically, they assessed:

"The possible benefits of asymmetrical strengthening of truncanl muscles on the convex side of the scoliotic curve through a single yoga pose, the side plank pose, in idiopathic and degenerative scoliosis."

The scientists worked with 25 participants with degenerative scoliosis, a term that describes how it came about (namely aging, tipping and slipping of discs, which "cascades" and leads to spinal curvature, or scoliosis). They also tested people with idiopathic scoliosis, for which the cause is unknown. It may begin in childhood and remain through adulthood, or even be noticed for the first time in adulthood, according to Spine Universe.

In the study, the subjects, whose spinal curvature measured anywhere from 6 degrees to 120 degrees, according to the Cobb angle, had spinal radiographs taken before being taught the side plank pose. For one week, they performed the pose for 20 seconds a day, after which they were asked to maintain the posture for as long as they could on the same side.

The participants averaged 1.5 minutes holding the pose every day for at least six days per week for an average of 6.8 months. After another series of spinal radiographs taken three to 22 months later, the pre- and post-measurements were compared, showing a significantly improved Cobb angle among all patients, averaging 32 percent. Among 19 patients, the improvement was an even more significant 40.9 percent.

Maintaining the Proper Form: How to Do Planks

If you've ever seen a fitness expert performing perfect planks, you may have thought the exercise looked easy, but as in other endeavors, it's not as easy as it may first appear. However, as the saying goes, practice does make perfect, and the results are worth it.

Here's another plus: Planks are very straightforward rather than complicated and don't involve some difficult-to-learn program or routine. In fact, the featured video shows the correct form for each variation of plank in the Total Body Workout in just 48 seconds. Once you get that down, you can start perfecting your form, then building up your time for maximized results.

- **The Full Plank** starts in a pushup position with your hands on the floor directly under your shoulders, arms straight and your toes bent in a "tiptoe" position, which holds you off the floor. Keep your back straight and your core tight, because allowing your back or bottom to sag downward will likely cause lower back pain later. Keep your chin lowered, eyes to the floor.
- **The Low Plank** position is identical except that rather than holding yourself up by your hands, arms straight, you bend your elbows and rest on your forearms instead. Again, tighten your stomach and glutes (aka butt muscles), and similarly to not sagging downward, keep your heels, bottom, back and shoulders in a straight line without arching upward.
- **The Raised Leg Plank** simply incorporates lifting each leg straight up behind you so that your heel is your highest point, abs and glutes tightened, and holding each leg behind you for 30 seconds.
- **The Side Plank** is also recommended for 30 seconds on each side. With your left elbow on the floor, the inside of your forearm and palm facing up, the side of your left foot shares your weight. Place your right hand on your hip so that the same elbow is your highest point. These work on your abdominal muscles and strengthen your spine.
- **The Reverse Plank** position requires that you sit on the floor, legs out straight and place your hands on the floor behind you so that when you push your body upward, you're looking at the ceiling instead of the floor. Squeeze your glutes.

However, Healthline also emphasizes that holding any of the above plank positions for too long may be counterproductive: "Make two minutes your maximum time limit. If you're looking to increase your athletic performance, research shows that repeated 10-second holds may be the best workout."

As you work on perfecting your planks, you'll find yourself gaining strength and automatically standing and sitting straighter, along with several (and maybe all) the positive side effects that come from body consciousness and exercise. While you're at it, you'll find your mood improving, as well as your self-esteem, and tension flowing from your body. So planks aren't just a body workout — your brain benefits, too.