

Top 5 Core Strengthening Exercises

By Lance Goyke

Introduction

"The Core" has *nearly* made it into every gym-goer's vocabulary. The problem is that those people are pretty much always just talking about their ab muscles. If you are building a strong core, however, you need a lot more than just abs.

I like a broad definition. One that encompasses bones, joints, muscles, and heck, even vital organs.

To hear that definition, check out my article [*Strengthen the Core and Maximize Mobility*](#).

I wanted to put together a handout that would augment that article, and this is it.

My goal is to outline the five most useful core exercises I know.

Note that these are not the five most difficult exercises I know. That's not very useful so I did not take the time to write it.

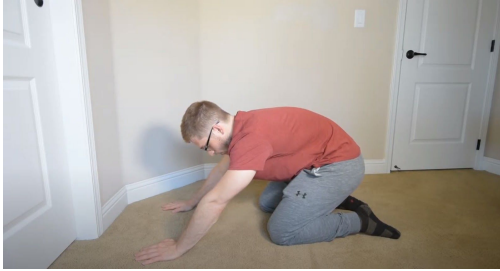
Instead, I want to give you tools you can use forever in your lifting career. I still perform each of the exercises in this guide even though I've been lifting for over ten years.

So without further preamble, let's see our first exercise.

Hope you enjoy 😊

-Lance Goyke, MS, CSCS

1) Rockback with Abs



The [Rockback with Abs](#) is my most used exercise because it's really good for pretty much everyone.

Goals

- Find a slightly flexed spine position to remove anterior pelvic tilt and spinal hyperextension.

Positives

- Works for pretty much everyone.

Limitations

- It's entry level; you're not going to build a six-pack with this one.

Recommended Protocol

- 5 sets of 5 breaths
- Nasal breathing only
- Five second pauses after every exhale

Places to Mess Up

- *Rushed breathing.* You should breathe slowly, only through your nose, and pause for five seconds after every exhale.
- *Spine position.* Though you want to tuck the hips and round the back, there IS such a thing as too much. You'll know you got it when you take your breath in and you feel your hips and all of your back expand.
- *Head position.* The neck and head should follow the rest of the spine. Reach long through the top of the head to prevent a crunched or forward head posture.

2) Supine Hooklying Pullover



The [Supine Hooklying Pullover](#) is great for people with sunken upper chests who like to overuse their pecs and lats.

Goals

- Flex arms overhead and towards the floor.

Positives

- Works really well for opening up the upper chest.

Limitations

- Easy to crunch, overusing neck and underusing the deep abdominal muscles.

Recommended Protocol

- 5 sets of 5 breaths
- Nasal breathing only
- Five second pauses after every exhale

Places to Mess Up

- *Rushed breathing.* You should breathe slowly, only through your nose, and pause for five seconds after every exhale.
- *Crunched spine position.* When the belly pushes forward, the rest of the body tightens up. Ensure exhales lead the belly button down towards the floor and the body stays as relaxed as possible.
- *Bending arms.* This makes it easier to do, but limits the effectiveness. Ensure the arms are straight and shoulders are not shrugged up or packed down.
- *Too much weight.* This one is difficult with only a little bit of weight. Make sure to select an appropriate load.

3) Hanging Knee Raise



The [Hanging Knee Raise](#) is great because it stretches the shoulder while challenging the grip and ab muscles.

Goals

- Flex knees up while stretching lats and pecs.

Positives

- Works really well for opening up the upper chest.

Limitations

- Grip can be a challenge preventing loading of the core

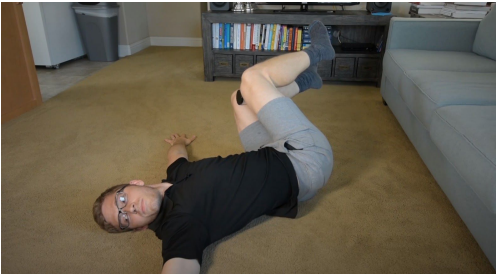
Recommended Protocol

- 3 sets of 10 reps
- Nasal breathing only

Places to Mess Up

- *Knees not high enough.* This exercise is only effective if the knees bend up to at least 90 degrees.
- *Crunched spine position.* The movement should come from the hips and belly, not the head and neck pushing forward.
- *Weak grip.* Break one set into multiple miniature sets until all reps can be performed consecutively.
- *Using momentum.* This exercise is only effective when done patiently. Do not allow jerking of the knees. Pause at top and bottom.
- *Swinging body.* On top of jerking the knees up, the body may swing forward and backward like a pendulum. Pause at the top and bottom and keep the body loose.

4) Lower Trunk Rotation



The [Lower Trunk Rotation](#) is one of my favorites because it requires looseness while loading the core muscles, helping maximize mobility.

Goals

- Twist entire trunk to promote mobility in arms, legs, and core

Positives

- Promotes core mobility and stability simultaneously

Limitations

- Can be difficult to keep hips tucked
- Can be difficult to know when to stop rotating

Recommended Protocol

- 3 sets of 8 breaths
- Nasal breathing only
- Inhale in rotated position
- Move only while exhaling

Places to Mess Up

- *Rushed movement.* This exercise is only effective when done slowly.
- *Rushed inhales.* Inhale when stationary. Exhale while moving.
- *Shoulder rise.* The hips do the moving while the shoulders serve as an anchor point. Don't let the shoulders come off the ground.
- *Losing hip tuck.* Make sure the knees stay bent up to at least 90 degrees.
- *Knees move independently.* Hold a bolster between the knees to keep them together and promote rotation at the spine instead of the hips.

5) Bear Walk



The [Bear Walk](#) is rounding out our top 5 because it emphasizes good pelvic motion, and the pelvis is the base of the core.

Goals

- Walk with locked knees to stretch hamstrings and calves

Positives

- Excellent hip and pelvic mobility promotor

Limitations

- Easy to crunch torso, shrug shoulders, and sway hips

Recommended Protocol

- 3 sets of 20 steps
- Nasal breathing only

Places to Mess Up

- *Shrugged shoulders.* Make sure the shoulders stay set down. Shrugging does NOT go with the flow of the exercise.
- *Crunched spine position.* Reach long through the top of the head to prevent.
- *Shifting hips.* Hip and pelvic motion reduces when the entire hip complex shifts from side to side on each step. Pretend as if the bear walk needs to be done in a narrow tunnel, not letting the hips hit the walls.
- *Too scrunched up.* Though getting the feet close to the hands is desirable, the knees must stay locked.
- *Tight calves.* Attempt to relax the calves, letting the heels sink toward the floor.

Summary

Now yes, there are a ton more options out there, but these five exercises are the ones I use the most.

1. Rockback with Abs
2. Supine Hooklying Pullover
3. Hanging Knee Raise
4. Lower Trunk Rotation
5. Bear Walk

If you do these everyday, you'll have a base level of core strength and mobility.

If these exercises start to get easy, they can be progressed by making each working set longer. A good goal is to be so proficient that they all feel easy.

The core is SUPER IMPORTANT, as I'm sure you realize by now. For more exercises like these, check out my [Handstand Prep playlist](#) or look at the list of [every core exercise I've ever uploaded to YouTube](#).

About the Author

Hey, I'm Lance Goyke, MS, CSCS. I've had countless clients over the years express concerns about their diets. It doesn't matter if they simply want health to combat their stressful day job or if they are a professional athlete training for an event. Everybody, at some point, feels a compulsion to continue eating in ways that make them less healthy, less attractive, and weak. It is human nature. This book is part of my answer to that. I wanted to draw on my years of experience coaching real people with real problems. I hope you found it helpful.

On top of roughly a decade of coaching experience to date, I've taken dozens of courses all around the country to fine tune my craft. You might find me scattered around the web, contributing to a few fitness websites, such as Livestrong and Rebel Performance, where other trainers go to learn how to become better coaches. I've taught hundreds of college students as an Assistant Professor at Indiana University-Purdue University of Indianapolis and also served as a mentor and tutor in many foundational science classes, such as human physiology, biomechanics, motor learning, general chemistry, and organic chemistry. In 2017, I obtained a Masters of Science in Anatomy & Cell Biology from Indiana University School of Medicine with an emphasis on teaching.

Next steps

If you want more tips on eating, training, or even becoming a personal trainer, check out my website (lancegoyke.com), sign up for my fitness newsletter (lancegoyke.com/email), and subscribe to my YouTube channel (<https://youtube.com/c/lancegoyke>).