

Engage Your CORE!

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Engage your core! You hear the phrase, and you may even try to flex your abs—but do you really know what it means when a trainer tells you to engage your core and how to do it right to get the most out of your workout?

Core engagement is really a feeling of being “stable” but this stability doesn't come from just contracting your abs or “sucking in” your stomach, which is what most people think when they hear “core.” In truth, your core encompasses everything on the front and backside of your body from your rib cage down to the bottom of your butt. That includes 29 different muscles; some that are buried deep in your body, while others (like your “six-pack” muscles) lie close to the surface. Now, engaging the core doesn't mean that you have to contract all 29 muscles simultaneously! That would certainly be a task! Instead, which core muscles you use depends on what activity you're doing. For example, the set of core muscles you use to jump rope will be a little different than the set of core muscles you use to perform a deadlift.

In general, core engagement should feel like there is pressure in your midsection that's spread evenly throughout the abdominal wall from your pelvis to your ribs. You should feel like everything is “cinching in” towards the centerline of the body, sort of like a belt is tightening around your center. Let's try it!

To engage your core, imagine bracing yourself for a sucker punch right to the stomach. Start with your BREATH. You're not going to suck in your stomach. You're going to take a deep breath and tighten your abdominal muscles. It may be helpful to picture “zipping up” your abs—bringing your navel up and toward your spine. When you engage your core, you should be able to continue breathing. First, fill your belly, and then inhale and exhale, only allowing your rib cage to move while keeping your centerline ‘cinched in’. Your belly should remain tight and full after the initial breath. After that point, you should be able to see your ribs move in and out when you breathe. Effective core bracing should keep your spine in a neutral alignment, in other words, you should avoid overly arching or curving your back. Practice in a mirror to see if you can maintain this alignment when dropping into an unweighted squat.

Remember, good core engagement serves as a stable foundation for really anything you do in life!! No matter what everyday task or exercise you're doing, the core is a fundamental component. For example, with good core engagement, you'll likely be able to carry a bag of groceries without twisting your spine or perform overhead dumbbell presses without moving your legs. Studies show that good or increased core engagement and stability may also reduce your risk of injury, improve your workout performance and functional movement! So don't forget to ENGAGE YOUR CORE! See ya at the gym!