

Pelvic floor activator

Because it's the base of your inner corset, the pelvic floor is the crucial starting point for training your entire core system. The first step is to stand squarely behind a chair or sink, keeping your feet hip-width apart and your toes turned in

(standing pigeon-toed stops the natural tendency to use the glutes instead of core muscles); see photo 1, above. To find the neutral position for your back, first arch it as far as you can, then

curl it, and come to rest mid-way. Place your hands lightly on the chair or sink and just let your tummy muscles flop. While keeping your shoulders relaxed, take a deep breath in. As you breathe out, imagine that you're trying to

suck a pea up a straw with the muscles of your vagina. Hold for three slow breaths (working up to five breaths) and release. Repeat five times. And do five sets a day—while you're waiting for the kettle to boil, or after brushing your teeth.

**Transversus/corset trainer**

Lie on the floor. Again, arch and curl to find a neutral spine position. Slip one hand, palm down, under the arch of your lower back. Place the other hand on your hip bone (see photo 2a). With shoulders relaxed, take a deep breath in. As you breathe out to a count of four, suck the imaginary pea up the straw

using your vaginal muscles and move your right leg slowly to the side (see photo 2b) until your hands feel a slight tip in your hips (they must stay square to the floor).



As you breathe in, bring your leg back to the centre, to a count of four. The pelvic floor works in tandem with transversus abdominus, which controls the leg movement. Start with three reps on each leg and build up to 10 each leg. Do this daily.

Triple treat

This variation on a sit-up uses every abdominal muscle layer, while keeping your torso long. First, sit on the edge of a hard, stable chair. Let your back, tummy and shoulders slump. Roll back

until your torso forms an angle of about 120 degrees to your thighs and your back makes a straight line with the back of your head. Take a slow breath in and then, as you breathe out,

lift your sternum away from your belly-button, without arching your back. Take three slow breaths, and with every breath out, draw up through your pelvic floor. Repeat three times, building up to 10 times—work it slowly and with control. Do it once or twice a day. Note: to start with, do this exercise with your hands resting on your thighs, then advance to the extended-arm (with shoulders relaxed) position shown in photo 3.

—Natalie Filatoff and Anna-Louise Bouvier *Physiotherapist Anna-Louise Bouvier developed "Physiocise" classes (held in Sydney) to help treat common back and neck injuries; see physiocise.com.au for more details. Bouvier's book Fix Your Back (\$29.95) is available at ABC shops.*

**breathing and the belly**

Recent research by Paul Hodges, professor and senior research fellow at the University of Queensland, found that "**people with breathing disorders**, such as asthma, have difficulty using their core muscles effectively to support the spine, and we predict are more likely to experience back pain than people who don't [have breathing problems]," he says. Long-term, efficient use of the abdominal muscles relies on being able to breathe deeply while they're working. As air moves deeper into your lungs, the diaphragm, which forms the lid of your deep-muscle corset, drops and helps activate the stabilising core muscles. You can

practise fuller breathing. Try this **simple exercise**: breathe in to a count of four, feeling your ribs expand sideways; as you breathe out to a count of four, imagine your pelvic floor as an elevator rising to push air from your lungs. **Another reason to be fit**: when you exert yourself (climbing the stairs, say), if your body has a choice between maintaining core control or breathing, it will choose breathing. So the less fit you are, the more out of breath you tend to get, the more out of control you will feel doing strenuous activity, and the more injury-prone you then become in those situations.