

the bottom line

If you want to improve muscle tone, you're sitting on your greatest asset. Here's how to get a great backside—and better posture

Pert, proud and primed—that's the rear view we hope to catch in the angled mirrors of lingerie fitting rooms. Those cubicles offer an honest appraisal of our backsides that's hard to get any other way, unless you're J.Lo or Kylie with paparazzi parlaying every cheeky move into tabloid images. Having a toned, trim bottom not only makes shopping for knickers or the perfect pair of jeans (see page 74) fun. It makes sprinting for the bus, sightseeing on holidays, strolling and pausing to chat graciously on the red carpet or standing at cocktail parties effortless.

Like all muscles, the bottom's gluteals (maximus, medius and minimus) lose mass, and therefore strength, if you don't use them. Maximus is the grunt, the prime mover of the three, but medius and minimus are the intellectuals, controlling the position of your hips as you move. The more we sit (the more we work at desks, drive cars, watch TV) the less action the glutes get, the more we forget how it felt to use them, and the more we find standing,

walking and running uncomfortable. While maximus will try to take the load, its lack of directional control calls for other muscles to pick up the slack. Most commonly, your hamstrings (the back of your upper leg), the muscles in your lower back, and the psoas muscles (the hip flexors that wire your pelvis to your lower back), are called on to compensate. The tighter these other muscles become, the less your glutes work, the more you slump, the more walking and standing around in an art gallery makes you grimace, the more you feel the need to sit at parties, the more your back aches—and the flatter and floppier your buns!

So, what happened to them? Lost their shape due to lack of use. It happens to almost everyone. Even very fit people often rely on compensating muscles to drag them around, rather than being propelled by strong glutes. Fortunately, just thinking about how you stand and move can reactivate your gluteals. No gym required. Working with your own body weight, balance and awareness can fix that bottom line.

why build your bottom?

- You'll have a peachy shape that's a pleasure to dress.
- Improved posture. Strong glutes (along with strong abdominals) are the means to standing tall and tirelessly.
- Power and stamina in movement. Strong glutes are virtually inexhaustible, so you'll go far, and maybe even fast.
- Greater stability and balance for other activities.



how to build your bottom

Two exercises to do anytime, anywhere: **stand evenly** (below) Whenever you stand, standing evenly helps all the right muscles hold you up, and develops beautiful, easy posture. If you don't do it very often, it will feel like exercise in itself. Stand with feet shoulder-width apart and feel your



weight evenly through both feet (don't let them roll out or in). Tuck in your tummy. Imagine a point at the centre of your chest and draw it upwards, away from your bellybutton, without arching your back. Relax your shoulders.

bottom clench

One of the best gluteal activators is to stand evenly, and squeeze your buttocks together as if you were holding a credit card between them. Keep your chest up, shoulders relaxed and knees soft (don't lock them), and hold the clench for 60 seconds. Do it again and again, until you get to the front of the queue at the bank, until the drinks run out, until the cows come home.

glute strength!

Once you've activated your glutes with these do-anywhere exercises and the strengthening sequence (right), you can vary your ongoing glute program with:

Yoga—the standing poses in particular;

Pilates—bridge and prone poses (lying on your tummy and lifting your legs);

Specific weights—up the ante on squats and lunges by holding hand weights (start light and be especially mindful of technique); *Swimming with flippers*—holding a kickboard in front of you, engage your tummy muscles to keep a straight back and clench buttocks alternately to move each leg.

try this sequence of exercises every second day for firm results



hip stretch Take a lunge position (above), with your right knee resting on the floor and your arms above your head. Align your right shoulder, hip, and knee perpendicular to the floor. Your left leg should form a right angle, with your knee pointing over your toe. Stretch up, tilt your pelvic bone towards your nose and squeeze your right buttock. You should feel a strong stretch down the upper right thigh. Hold for at least five slow breaths, lower arms and hold for another five breaths. Do the same with your left leg. Repeat stretch on both sides.

lunges Stand evenly with legs hip width apart, step your left foot about one metre in front of the right, keeping knees and feet parallel. Roll



onto the toes of your back foot, until your right thigh is perpendicular to the floor. Slowly lower your right knee to the floor (keeping right thigh and left shin perpendicular to the floor), to a count of three, and return to the resting lunge position. The point is for your right buttock to control the movement: try to keep it firm while lunging. Repeat at least 10 times before changing legs. (Fixing your gaze on a stationary point in the distance helps you balance.)



squats With feet parallel and shoulder width apart, count three slowly as you lower to a squat, as if you were going to sit on a chair (having one behind you helps the sensation) but just stopped short. Hold for five slow breaths, keeping your head in line with your spine and your knees pointing over your toes. Slowly return to standing. Repeat at least 10 times.

glute and hip stretch Sit with your bottom bones balancing on the very edge of a hard chair. Cross your right ankle over your left knee, keeping your hips as level as possible and your

back straight. Draw the centre of your chest up away from your bellybutton, and without bending your back or slumping, angle your upper body forward, over your leg. Relax your arms onto your leg,



without leaning on it (pushing right elbow down on right knee will increase the stretch). Hold for five slow breaths, relaxing into the stretch with every breath out. Change legs. Repeat both sides.

—**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. Her book *Fix Your Back* (\$29.95) is available at ABC shops.