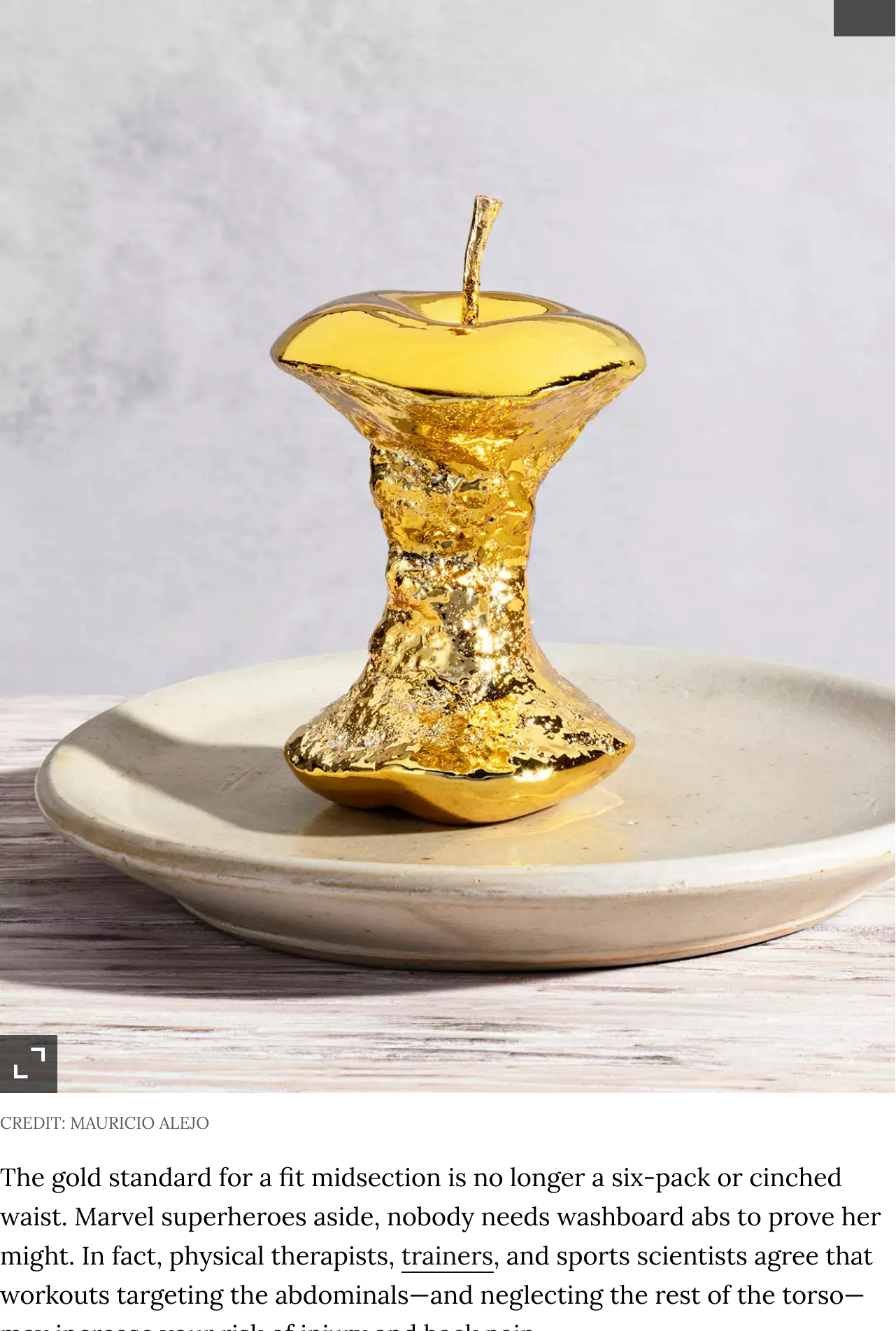


# Strengthen Your Core

It's a balance of inner strength and all-around stability that, yes, makes you look lean—but more importantly, helps you move freely and avoid injury for years to come.

By [Louisa Kamps](#) | March 25, 2022



CREDIT: MAURICIO ALEJO

The gold standard for a fit midsection is no longer a six-pack or cinched waist. Marvel superheroes aside, nobody needs washboard abs to prove her might. In fact, physical therapists, trainers, and sports scientists agree that workouts targeting the abdominals—and neglecting the rest of the torso—may increase your risk of injury and [back pain](#).

The more modern approach is to think holistically about your core, starting with understanding its anatomy: The term doesn't just refer to your waistline; it encompasses all the muscles in your back, hips, buttocks, pelvic floor (the hammock of [muscles and ligaments](#) that stretches from the tailbone to the pubic bone, supporting the bladder and uterus), and diaphragm (a dome-shaped muscle just below the heart and lungs that [regulates breathing, digestion](#), and other vital functions).

"A healthy core facilitates complex movement of the spine—bending forward, backward, and right and left, as well as twisting into different positions," says [Katy Bowman](#), MS, a biomechanist and the author of *Diastasis Recti: The Whole-Body Solution to Abdominal Weakness and Separation* (\$15.31, [amazon.com](#)). "When it's flexible and strong, we move with ease." Consider simple these tactics to start transforming and get centered.

Related: [Everything You Need to Know About Pilates](#)

## Stay consistent with exercises.

If you regularly do crunches, [unfurl yourself and relax](#). Powering through too many can cause spinal disks to bulge and press painfully on your nerves. Instead, train your whole trunk at once. Our core muscles have distinct functions (glutes rotate the hips and keep the pelvis stable, for example), but together they provide dynamic support all around the spine, like flexible guylines tethering a cellphone tower, says Stuart McGill, PhD, a professor emeritus of spine biomechanics at the [University of Waterloo](#), in Ontario, and author of *Back Mechanic* (\$34.95, [amazon.com](#)). To keep them supple and strong, aim for five to 10 minutes of core exercises every other day, suggests [Elizabeth Melville](#), a Milwaukee physical therapist.

Try a few safe, spine-neutral moves: Bird dogs—starting on all fours, extend your opposite arm and leg, and hold for five counts before switching—facilitate cross-body movements like pulling a heavy bin down from a high shelf. Bridges (lie on your back and press through your feet to lift your hips upward) also help send juice to your glutes for [running](#), golfing, or hoisting your dog into a bath. Planks (regular and on the sides) are unparalleled for stabilizing you all day long, [whether you're gardening](#) or grabbing a gallon of milk from the fridge. Hold the planks for equal amounts of time (say, 30 seconds each) to fire up your obliques and abdominals evenly. If doing them from your toes is too challenging, drop to your knees.

## Relax your stomach.

Sucking in your stomach is another old-fashioned move—and a recipe for back pain. When you contract your abs too much, they can tug your [spine out of alignment](#), curling you forward into a shrimp shape and impeding your airflow. (Shallow breaths can also [increase blood pressure](#) and keep you in a state of chronic [low-grade stress](#)—oof.) You may also be more likely to experience problems in your pelvic floor, such as incontinence. To unlearn this tendency, Julie Wiebe, a clinical assistant professor in the physical-therapy department at the [University of Michigan–Flint](#), suggests first practicing deep-diaphragmatic breathing: While sitting or standing, slowly expand your stomach with an in-breath, then imagine your pelvic-floor muscles relaxing downward at the end of your [inhalation](#). Or try what she calls an "umbrella breath": Place your hands high up on both sides of your rib cage and feel your ribs gently opening as you inhale and closing as you exhale. Next, Wiebe suggests combining one of these deep inhalations with a squat to reinforce the message—to your brain, your pelvic floor, and the rest of your core—that it's possible to move in a way that's flexible and relaxed. With enough practice, this sensation will become second nature. Beyond teaching people to breathe better, Wiebe often shows them better ways to use this team of muscles in a balanced and responsive way with movements. For runners experiencing back pain or incontinence, for instance, she fine-tunes their stride so they lean forward slightly, with a more relaxed belly, to help reduce the impact on the joints [that occurs with each footfall](#).

Related: [Small Changes You Can Make to Minimize Back and Neck Pain](#)

## Keep moving.

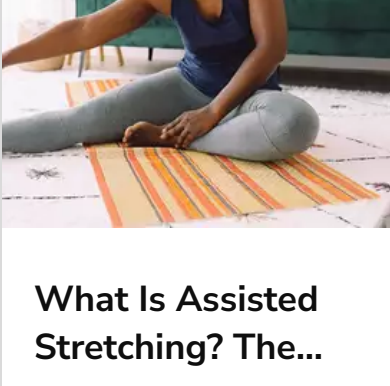
To maintain a limber (i.e., functional) midsection, move as much as you can, says Bowman. Standing up, even for a few seconds, has been shown to keep our balance systems tuned up so we maintain coordination, says Joan Vernikos, a former NASA scientist and author of *Sitting Kills, Moving Heals* (\$10.99, [amazon.com](#)). [Walk around](#) when you take calls, even if it's just from the kitchen to the bathroom, or set timers on the half hour to remind yourself to get a groove on. If you have five minutes between meetings, sneak in a few reps of core-stabilizing exercises: Both single-leg lifts (standing on one foot, slowly lift up your opposite knee to a 90-degree angle and hold, with your core braced and hips held level, then switch sides) and Romanian dead lifts (hinge forward at the waist, lifting one leg behind you with hips held square, until your torso is almost parallel to the floor; squeeze your glutes to stand back up, then switch sides) improve balance and strength.

## Mind your spine.

Whether you are standing at the counter chopping veggies or [sitting down](#) to dinner, tune in to your [posture](#). The movement of your spine is optimized when the vertebrae stack up in a slight S shape. To facilitate good form, untuck your pelvis: Imagine it's a mixing bowl of batter you are tilting forward slightly to pour out. Then lift your rib cage and relax your shoulders, says Bowman. When sitting for long stretches, scoot forward so you aren't using the back of the chair to hold you up. Slouching automatically turns off your trunk, so check your posture every 30 minutes or so to reset, pouring that batter and following the other cues above. They're all small habits, but they amount to a strong core.

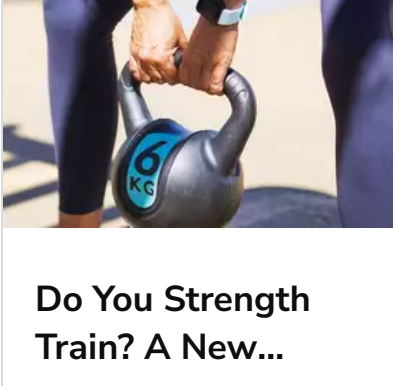
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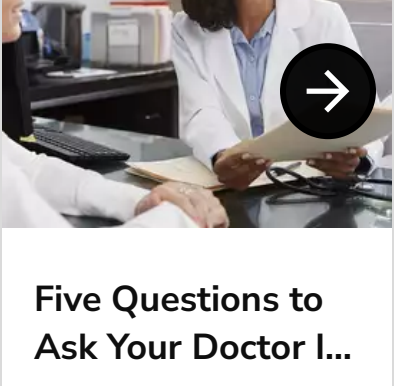
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# What Is Assisted Stretching? The Popular Activity Could Help with Chronic Aches and Pains

Practitioners say it can increase flexibility, blood circulation, and range of motion.

By [Madeline Buiano](#)



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When you think of [stretching](#), you likely imagine it as an independent activity with a person bending down to touch their toes or pull their arm over their head. While that's certainly effective way to extend your muscles and [improve flexibility](#), assisted stretching has been gaining traction as a way to not only increase range of motion, but also to alleviate [chronic aches and pains](#). So, what is it? According to a [report](#) by CNN, assisted stretching involves a trained practitioner who stretches your body for you, typically at a dedicated facility. The professionals follow a stretching program tailored to each individual and their personal goals.

The practice has grown in popularity during the pandemic as more people search for ways to [improve their overall health](#). According to CNN, the assisted stretching company [StretchLab](#) had 72 locations before the pandemic and are now operating with more than 150 studios across the United States, with over 600 franchises in development. The company's customers range in age from four to 90-plus, all coming in with different goals in mind whether they're sedentary, professional athletes, or need care for movement disorders and neuromuscular disease. "People are starting to see stretching as that modality that fits into health and wellness, similar to physical therapy or chiropractic care," Verdine Baker, StretchLab's president told CNN.

Related: [Your Complete Guide to Stretching](#)

Professionals in the field say there are several benefits to assisted stretching, including increasing flexibility, [blood circulation](#), and range of motion. It can also help [decrease pain and stiffness](#), improve core strength and posture, lower your [risk of injury](#), and even lower your stress levels. Despite these benefits, there is still some confusion on whether or not assisted stretching is better than stretching on your own. Jeff Brannigan, cofounder and program director at Stretch\*d, an assisted stretching business based in New York City, told CNN, "People tend to not stretch, or they stretch the wrong way," he said. "They tend to hold positions too long or force themselves into positions they're not prepared for, which can have adverse effects on the body."

There have been several studies that have compared the benefits of assisted stretching to unassisted stretching. A pilot study on the impact of assisted stretching programs in older adults found that it helped increase their range of motion, mobility, and functional power, but those results are compared to a control group that attended classes with little physical activity rather than independent stretching. Another [study](#) conducted by researchers at Illinois State University observed the benefits of a specific stretching technique and found it improved hamstring flexibility whether it was performed assisted or independently.

Although the jury is still out on how much better assisted stretching is for you than unassisted, Baker told CNN he thinks it's here to stay adding that it helped him get back on his feet after four knee surgeries. He also noted that his customers rave about the benefits of assisted stretching. "They're telling us how it's helping them with their mobility, flexibility and range of motion, which then allows them to do the things that make them happy, like [going hiking or golfing](#)," he told CNN. "If something helps people to do the things they love to do, it's an easy decision."