

Forgotten muscles

Stop fixating on killer quads and awesome abs — the muscles you can't see need working, too

Diana Pollard

AT THE GYM, I often see members exercising overused muscles such as the biceps or performing tons of abdominal crunches while neglecting important body parts that need to wake up and get moving.

Activities of daily living already use more of our anterior muscles — quadriceps, biceps and chest muscles — while other muscles are neglected and often lie dormant. How can we get at these forgotten groups and regain muscular balance? The good news is that there are exercises for neglected muscles that can be done handily at the gym or at home.

For any and all exercises, maintain good posture and trunk stability (use those tummy muscles to protect your lower back, keep good balance and help with your posture), and avoid shrugging your shoulders. As time goes on, these mechanical musts should become unconscious habits.

For each of these five exercises, start with two sets of 12 repetitions each, with a two-minute rest between sets.

1. BOTTOM OF THE BACK

The lower back muscles are often a challenge. On close examination, we see that many people do a lot of bending forward from the lower back during everyday activities — just sitting at their desk or picking up things from the floor — rather than flexing forward from the hips and keeping the back in line.

One way to activate and strengthen the lower back muscles is to add 10 to 20 pounds to a backpack, position it low on the back and go for your daily walk — however long suits your usual comfort zone — on an uneven surface such as a gravel path or the unpaved side of the road. This simple exercise will wake up your lower back extensors. As a bonus, you'll work in a little cardio at the same time.





2. CENTRAL CORE

The latissimi dorsi make up a large muscle group starting under your arms in a V-shape and attaching down along the spine to the lower back. These workhorse muscles act as central core stabilizers. Lying on your back with your knees bent, arms straight up overhead, palms facing forward and holding small weights (three to five pounds, 1.3 to 2.2 kilos to start), slowly bring the weights back behind your head within a comfortable range of motion (don't force anything or let your back arch). Slowly return your arms to the starting position. This controlled move does the work.

3. MID-BACK

The rhomboids and lower trapezius group, both located mid-back, need a simple rowing move. In the gym, use an exercise cable with a two-handed grip. At home, trap an exercise elastic in the door using a door attachment, position it just below waist height and stand back with your feet shoulder-width apart. With palms facing in and your arms close to your sides, pull back (no shoulder shrugging!) and squeeze your shoulder blades together. Return to the starting position without rounding forward.

4. GET READY FOR ROTATIONS

Many daily activities and sports rely on rotations and twists of the central core/trunk. We need to condition the muscles involved to avoid injury. Lying on your back with your feet off the floor, knees bent at 90 degrees and arms out to the side, roll gently from side to side. Keep your shoulders on the floor and don't exaggerate the move. Think of massaging those lower back muscles as you roll.

5. HIP AREA

The gluteus medius muscles at the side of the hips are often dormant and underworked. Lie on one side, keeping your head relaxed, with an exercise band around your legs just above your knees. With your knees bent and your heels glued together, open and close the top knee like a clamshell without rolling back at the hip. Flip over and work the other side.

BALANCING ACT

As always, a healthy body is a balanced combination of strength and flexibility. At the end of your exercise routine, gently stretch all the muscles you worked, holding for at least 20 seconds without bouncing. Note that we stretch only those muscles that need stretching. Excess mobility/flexibility actually results in decreased joint stability and increases the risk of injury. On the reverse side, immobile joints can adversely affect posture and alignment and cause muscle strain.

WATER BABIES

And remember that our muscles are 80% water, so make sure to have sufficient hydration to maximize muscle performance. Drink water 20 minutes before a workout and at intervals. Don't wait until you're thirsty!

As always, if you have any possible health issues, check with your doctor or physiotherapist before starting a new exercise program.

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