

Sciatica and Low Back Pain

Please Note:

- If you sustained pain whilst doing any of the exercises described below, do not do it and consult your doctor.
- The highlighted links below will take you to external website pages.
- The exercises below covers a variety of Low Back Pain causes, so it is advisable to discuss with your treating doctor which ones apply to you.

The [sciatic nerve](#) is the largest and longest nerve in the body. It runs from the lower back region through the buttock and continues down the back of the leg. The sciatic nerve controls the movement of many muscles in the thigh and leg as well as provides a means of sensory input to the brain. When the sciatic nerve becomes irritated and inflamed, it results in sciatica.

Sciatica is a common cause of low back pain and leg pain. It is usually caused by pressure on the sciatic nerve from a [herniated disc](#). Sciatica occurs most frequently in people 30 to 50 years of age and can be a debilitating disorder in some people. Sciatica normally only affects one side of the lower extremities, and the pain often radiates from the lower back all the way down the back of the thigh and the leg. Depending on where the sciatic nerve is affected, the pain may also radiate to the foot or toes.

Common Causes of Sciatica

There are many causes of sciatica. For this reason, if you experience the symptoms of sciatica, get evaluated by your physician to determine the cause. Some more common causes of sciatica include:

- [**Herniated Disc**](#)
Sciatica can result when one of the vertebral discs of the lower back protrudes outward and compresses the nerve roots that form the sciatic nerve. This compression irritates the nerve and causes swelling and pain along the sciatic nerve. Herniated discs are the most common cause of sciatica.
- [**Lumbar Spinal Stenosis**](#)
Lumbar spinal stenosis refers to a narrowing of the spinal canal in the lower back region. When the spinal canal becomes narrow in this area, it can compress portions of the nerves that combine to form the sciatic nerve.
- [**Piriformis Syndrome**](#)
The piriformis is a small muscle located deep in the buttock region. It assists in abducting (lifting out) and externally rotating the hip joint. The sciatic nerve runs extremely close to the piriformis muscle, and occasionally runs through it. As a result, when the piriformis muscle becomes tight, it often puts pressure on the sciatic nerve causing irritation and inflammation.

Exercises for Sciatica

Stretching and strengthening exercises that target the muscles of the lower back, abdomen, and thighs can help reduce the symptoms of sciatica. A few beneficial exercises to help decrease pain associated with sciatica include:

Piriformis Stretches

Stretch 1:

Lie on your back.

Keep your head down on the ground

Bend both knees

Put bend the knee of the affected leg and place your ankle on the opposite knee

Push down on the knee of your affected leg as you pull up behind the thigh of the unaffected leg

Hold for 5 seconds and repeat 5 times

Stretch 2:

Sit with your unaffected leg straight out in front

Hold onto the ankle of your affected leg and pull it directly towards your chest

Hold for 5 seconds and repeat 5 times

Back Stretches:

Back Extension: Prone



1. Lie on your stomach.
2. Prop yourself up on your elbows extending your back.
3. Start straightening your elbows, further extending your back.
4. Continue straightening your elbows until a gentle stretch is felt.
5. Hold for 15 seconds.
6. Return to the starting position.
7. Repeat 9 more times.

Cat Stretch:



1. Get down on the floor on your hands and knees.
2. Push your back up towards the ceiling (like a cat arching its back).
3. Continue arching until you feel a gentle stretch in your back.
4. Hold for 15 seconds.
5. Return to the starting position.
6. Repeat 9 more times.

The Pelvic Tilt:



1. Lie on your back with knees bent and feet flat on the floor.
2. Exhale and press the small of your back against the floor.
3. Hold for 15 seconds.
4. Return to the starting position.
5. Repeat 9 more times.

Hamstring Stretches:

Tight hamstrings are a common finding in most people. However, you can do easy exercises to increase your hamstring length. Learn four easy exercises and be on your way to a more limber lifestyle.

Exercise #1



1. Sit on the floor with both legs out straight.

2. Extend your arms and reach forward by bending at the waist as far as possible while keeping your knees straight.
3. Hold this position for 10 seconds.
4. Relax.
5. Repeat.

Exercise #2



1. Sit on the floor with one leg out straight.
2. Bend the other leg at the knee and position the sole of that foot against your opposite inner thigh.
3. Extend your arms and reach forward over the one straight leg by bending at the waist as far as possible.
4. Hold this position for 10 seconds.
5. Relax.
6. Repeat with the other leg.

Exercise #3



1. Stand and cross your right foot in front of your left.

2. Slowly lower your forehead to your right knee by bending at the waist.
3. Keep both knees straight.
4. Hold this position for 10 seconds.
5. Relax.
6. Repeat by crossing your left foot in front of your right.

Exercise #4



1. Stand one foot from a wall and place your hands on the wall at shoulder height, shoulder-width apart.
2. Take a step back with one leg while pushing into the wall.
3. Keep your back straight and press your heels into the floor.
4. Hold for 10 seconds.
5. Step forward and repeat with the other leg.

Core Strengthening:

The body's "core" refers to the muscles around the abdomen, pelvis, and back. This core is in the body's center of gravity. As a result, it plays a role in almost all activities. From sitting to standing, walking to running, the core muscles are at work stabilizing our body from the force of gravity.

Weak core muscles make one more susceptible to poor posture, back pain, and injuries during activity. For this reason it is important to have strong core muscles.

Ideally core strengthening exercises should be performed three times per week for maximum effectiveness.

Core exercises have, if you will pardon the pun, moved to the center of the fitness world. And for good reason. If your core is strong and flexible, stresses will be distributed throughout your body

better, your spine will be supported, and you will be able to move with greater efficiency. But here is what you need to know about core exercises: You need to know what the core is.

Too many people point vaguely to their bellies, announce they are going to do core work, then slam out some crunches and think they've done core. Not really.

The Core Muscles

In the broadest definitions of the core, fitness experts include the whole central section of the body all the way from the pelvis and hips up through the midsection. A big list of core muscles might look like this:

- Deep back muscles like the erector spinae and multifidus
- [Hip flexors](#) and spine stabilizers like the psoas, iliacus, and rectus femoris
- Hip adductors and abductors
- The gluteus muscles (butt muscles)
- The [abdominal muscles](#) from the surface [rectus abdominis](#) to the deep [transversus abdominis](#)

What you want to note about that is the above list is that we are talking about both surface and deep muscles as well as muscles of the front and back of the body. That's a lot more than just the abdominal muscles! In Pilates, we call it the [powerhouse](#) area.

The Core of the Core

The core muscles that are truly core are those that lie close to the center of the body. The [psoas](#), a long muscle that runs down the front of the spine and attaches at the top of the femur; the [multifidus](#) and erector spinae, both deep spine muscles; and transversus abdominis, the deepest abdominal muscle are examples. Their actions have more to do with stabilizing than with the heavy work some of the more surface muscles do. When I think of core muscles, these are the ones I really think of. I might add in the [pelvic floor](#) and [diaphragm](#) as well.

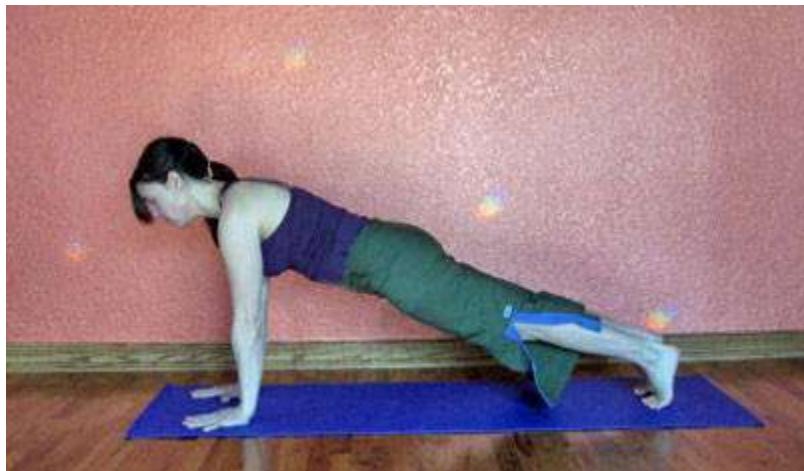
So core exercises have to address a lot of muscles that work differently yet in concert with each other. It won't do to just focus on abdominal muscles. And it won't do to think in terms of isolations of muscle groups or brute strength. We need a variety of exercises that promote core strength and integration in different ways. Exercises that challenge our stability as we bend and move - making all the core muscles work together to stabilize the spine and maintain balance and freedom of the limbs - are typically top choices for core exercises.

Core Exercises

Pilates is a system of exercise that has long been in the forefront of core exercise. Almost every Pilates exercise emanates from an awareness of the core and builds on deep stability training. The inherent stability challenges that come with working with Pilates equipment like the [reformer](#) and [Pilates chair](#) make them ideal for core training. Indeed, that is what they were designed for. Exercises done on the [exercise ball](#) and newly popular TRX suspension system are similarly taking advantage of all the work the deep muscles have to do to keep us stable and balanced in relation to an unstable base of some kind.

Examples core exercises:

Exercise Instructions for 3 Pilates Plank Variations



Plank is a popular exercise in [Pilates](#), [yoga](#), and other fitness methods. Holding this one position strengthens your core and gives your whole body a workout. Plank tones the arms and legs, and especially the shoulder, back, and abdominal muscles.

When we do plank in Pilates, we pay special attention to our alignment. Certain key elements will be part of each version of plank we look at in this series. Use this check list to make sure each plank you do reinforces the integrity of your whole body:

- Your [abdominal muscles](#) are in and lifted.
- Your spine is long.
- Your shoulders are relaxed with the scapula (wing bones) settled in the back, not popping up. (read about [scapular stabilization](#))
- Your legs are engaged in the movement, drawing in toward the mid-line of your body.
- Your body creates one long line from your ankle bone to your ear.
- Your neck is a long extension of your spine.
- All of your movements are performed with the [Pilates principles](#): centering, concentration, control, precision, breath, and flow.

Let's get started.

Pilates Plank

1. Begin on your hands and knees with your knees directly under your hips, and your hands directly under your shoulders.

Roll your shoulders back and down as if you were going to slide your scapula into your pockets. Have your finger tips pointing forward and turn your inner elbows slightly forward as well. These moves will help stabilize your upper body and keep your chest open.

2. Lift up in your middle as you step one foot straight back and then the other. Keep your legs engaged in supporting the plank position.
3. Hold for 3 - 5 breaths. Release and repeat 1 or 2 more times.

Dolphin Arm Plank



Dolphin arm plank is an interesting variation taken from yoga. Though it is very similar to the plank we do with straight arms, some people feel it drives even more effort into the core abdominal and back muscles.

1. Begin as you did for regular plank, on your hands and knees. Then move your elbows to the floor directly under your shoulders.

Your forearms can extend on the floor straight in front of you with your hands flat, or your hands can be clasped with fingers entwined. Make sure your shoulders are back and down, and your chest is open.

2. Keep your abdominal muscles pulled in to support the movement as you step back into a plank position. Again, your legs are together. The length of your body is supporting this move -- it is not focused only in the upper body.
3. It is tempting to either sag in the middle or let the butt be too high. Both positions make things easier on the core, but it's the core that we want to work! So make sure you are in a straight line.
4. Hold for 3 to 5 breaths. Release and repeat 1 or 2 more times.

Both regular plank and dolphin arm plank are good exercises for testing your symmetry side to side. The shoulders should be even on both sides as should your pelvis. Double check that alignment so that you increase your shoulder and pelvic stability as you work.

Side Plank Set Up



Side plank is more difficult than the last two plank positions we worked with, plain and dolphin arm. Supporting yourself in a sideways position is much less stable.

In Pilates we take advantage of unstable positions to help us develop [core strength](#) as the core muscles have to work hard to make the subtle adjustments that keep the form we want.

Side plank takes support from the whole body, especially the abs. But in side plank you are going to need your core to provide even more stability for the pelvis, and you will need a lot of shoulder stability and arm strength as well.

1. Begin sitting sideways with your legs folded to the side. Put your top foot on the floor in front of the other, heel to toe. Feel that you are seated with deep creases at your hips, allowing even the top hip to drop toward the mat.
2. Place your supporting hand on the mat straight out to the side, just a few inches beyond your shoulder.
3. Before you press up, draw your abs in, drop your shoulders, and lengthen your spine.

Side Plank Exercise



1. On an inhale, press into the supporting arm and extend your legs to lift your pelvis away from the mat. Take your body into a long line.

Feel support from your abs, from under the supporting side, and from your back (especially your latissimus area).

Squeeze the tops of your legs together. Think of pulling your sit bones together. This will give you more support from the pelvic floor.

Make sure you are stacked vertically so that your shoulders are one on top the other, as are your hips.

2. Your top arm can remain along your side or you can extend it toward the ceiling as is pictured.
3. smile.

4. Hold a few seconds, or a few breaths if you are strong. If you start to sag, take a break. There is no point in holding a position with poor form.

Side Bend and Stretch



Step 1:

Side stretch is one of my favorite Pilates exercises. It builds strength and endurance. It increases flexibility. And it makes you work your inner thighs along with your shoulder stability, arms and powerhouse. Side stretch is a balance challenge that makes you check your alignment and pull up through your midline non-stop.

Side stretch takes side plank into a side bend and stretch. And page 4, side stretches on Pilates equipment shows you how this exercise evolves so be sure to see that after you learn the exercise:

Set up

1. Begin sitting sideways with your legs folded to the side. Put your top foot on the floor in front of the other, heel to toe. Release tension in your hips so that you are seated with deep creases at your hips. The sit bone of your top hip drops toward the mat (it might not get all the way there, that's OK).

2. Place your supporting hand on the mat in line with your hip and a few inches past your shoulder.

Step 2:



1. Before you press up, draw your abs in, drop your shoulders, and lengthen your spine.
2. Inhale: Press into the supporting arm and straighten your legs to lift your pelvis away from the mat.
3. Use your inner thighs - up and in - even as you press down through your feet. This is a big key to this exercise. Think of pulling your sit bones together to get more support from the pelvic floor and up through your midline.
4. Feel support from your abs, from under the supporting side, and from your back (especially your latissimus area).
5. You are stacked vertically so that your shoulders are one on top the other, as are your hips. Go up as if you are between two walls.

If you are a beginner, this exercise is quite challenging and it is fine to work on going just this far, but read on so you know where you are headed eventually.

Step 3:



1. Keep your body in a long lifted line and sweep your top arm in an arc to reach overhead. As your arm goes up and over, your shoulder stays down and your shoulder blade slides subtly down your back.
2. Take a long stretch all the way through your body. Feel this through the middle of your body from the tip of your fingers to your feet.
3. If you have your balance, take the stretch further by reaching into a side arc with your upper body. This arc goes up with the sides of the ribs sliding up toward the ceiling. It doesn't just curve over and down as if to drape over the supporting arm (see upper left next page).

Make sure you are pressing through the supporting arm and getting good lift out of the shoulder. Do not lock your elbow or hyperextend (our lovely model is a little hyperextended here)

4. Return to side plank
5. Return to start position
6. Repeat 2 times on this side
7. Change sides

At this level you are working toward performing this exercise with great fluidity and precision. Mark each position without stifling the flow of the movement.

There are variations on foot positions for this exercise. Some people do it with the feet together so that you go up on the outside edge of the bottom foot. I have also seen it with the bottom foot in front. As always, I encourage you to explore it all.



Now you can see how the skills learned in an exercise like [side stretch on the mat](#) translate onto Pilates equipment like the [Pilates chair](#), [reformer](#), and [cadillac](#).

Beautiful, right?

Side stretch is one of the [classical Pilates mat exercises](#). It is followed by [boomerang](#)

Note: In the photo on the bottom, Alisa Wyatt is using many of the skills we are working on in side stretch as she does twist on the Pilates chair

Pilates Side Kick



The exercises in this series are wonderful for toning and strengthening the hips and thighs and abs. They emphasize length and using the [powerhouse](#) core muscles to stabilize the trunk as the lower body moves independently.

The set up for the side kick series is basically the same for all of the exercises. Setting good alignment and maintaining it throughout the exercises is the key to making them effective. See the set up instructions below.

The exercise instructions in this series have cues for doing the exercise, and a link to more extensive instructions. Please do go through the full instructions if you haven't seen them before as doing the exercises precisely will yield the best results.

Side Kick Series Set Up

- Lie on your side and line up your ears, shoulders, hips, knees and ankles.

Prop your head on your hand, making sure to lift the ribs away from the mat so that your back and neck stay in alignment.

You can [modify](#) this position by reaching your bottom arm straight out along the mat above your head and resting your head on it.

- The front hand rests firmly, palm down, on the mat in front of your chest. Use this hand to help stabilize, but don't depend on it -- depend on your abs.
- Move your legs slightly forward of your hips. This will help your balance and protect your lower back.
- Rotate the legs out slightly from the hips, in [Pilates stance](#).
- Double check your line up. The shoulders should be stacked one on top of the other, as should the hips. The ears, shoulders, and hips are in a line, with the knees and ankles a little in front.

Side Kick Front/Back



Kick Front

- Lift the top leg a few inches. Flex the foot and send energy out through the heel.
- With the foot flexed, swing the top leg to the front. At the full length of your kick, do a small pulse kick.

Lengthen Back

- Keeping length in your leg and through the whole body, point your toe and sweep the top leg to the back. Pause, but do not do a second kick.

Important: Only reach as far back as you can go without crunching the low back or moving the pelvis. Again, a big part of the challenge of the exercise is to use the core muscles to keep the entire trunk of the body stable.

- Flex the foot and kick to the front.

Repeat this exercise 5 to 10 times.

Kneeling side kick takes the challenge of this exercise a step further. Be sure to try it once you are comfortable with the one.

Side Kick Up/Down



Kick Up

- Double check your line up. Your shoulders should be stacked one on top of the other, as should the hips. Also, your shoulders and hips are in a line with the knees and ankles a little in front.
- Make sure that your abdominal muscles are pulled in and up.
- Now, lengthening even more through the top leg, kick up toward the ceiling (smoothly, use your abs for control).
- Keep the hip bones stacked. Make sure that the pelvis does not tilt back to let the leg go up.

Control Down

- Pull your abdominals up, in opposition to the lengthening of the leg, as you control the descent of the leg.

Side Leg Lifts



While this exercise is not really a kick, the challenge it presents is similar to the other exercises in this series.

Inhale:

Bring your breath down the length of your spine, making your entire body very long from tip to toe.

Exhale:

Use your abdominals to bring both legs up a few inches off your mat. Focus on keeping your inner legs together, all the way from the sit bones to the heels.

Inhale:

Lengthen your legs back down on the mat. Use control.

Do this exercise 5 to 8 times.

Inner Thigh Lifts



For inner thigh lifts, the top arm and leg are in new positions, but the initial [set up](#) is the same as it was for the other exercises in this series.

Bring the foot of your top leg up to rest in front of your hips.

Thread your top hand behind the calf and grasp the outside of your ankle.

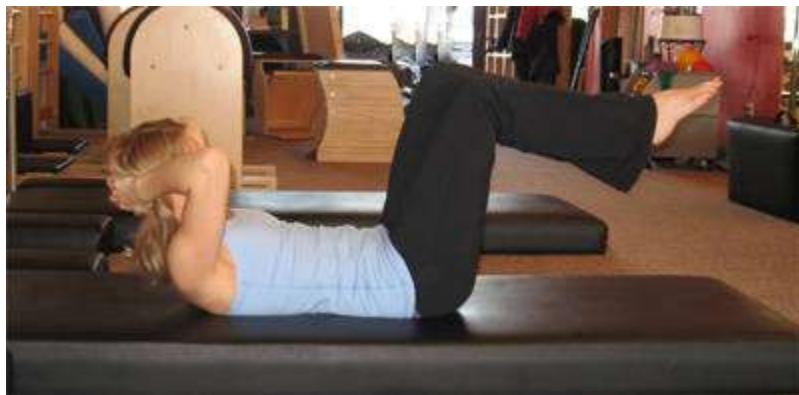
For more stability, modify it so the foot rests in front of your thigh, and the top hand is flat on the floor in front of your chest.

Inhale: Keeping the bottom leg straight, use your inner thigh to raise it a few inches off the floor. The feeling is that you extend the leg so long that it raises up off the floor.

Exhale: Maintain that sense of length as you slowly lower the leg to the floor.

Do 5 to 8 sets on each side.

Pilates Flat Abdominals



Pilates is all about [core strength](#). The benefits of core strength go way beyond flat [abdominals](#), but it is the flat ab results of doing Pilates exercises that help make Pilates as popular as it is.

The secret to getting flat abs is to *do the exercises correctly*. That means that the abdominals have to be very pulled in. They cannot be allowed to bunch up and poof forward. When that happens, the rectus abdominis, the outermost muscle of the abdominal muscles, is getting shorter and bunching up. This might make that muscle stronger, but it will not result in balanced development, core strength, or a flat stomach (crunchers take note!). The flat abs come from the deep [scoop of the abdominals](#), balanced by the length and breadth of the spine.

Let's begin!

Warm Up: One of the keys to doing abdominal exercises effectively is being warmed up first. If you haven't warmed up yet, choose at least two exercise from the [Warm Up Folder](#).

The Hundred



The hundred is a classic Pilates mat exercise. The hundred requires that we coordinate the breath with the movement, and be strong and graceful at the same time.

1) Lie on your back with your knees bent and the shins parallel to the floor. For now, put your hands behind your knees.

Inhale to begin.

2) Exhale: Bring your chin down and curl your upper spine up off the floor. Keep the shoulders engaged in the back. The gaze is down into the [scoop of the abs](#).

Stay here and inhale.

3) Exhale: At the same time, activate your abs, and extend your legs and arms toward the wall in front of you.

Your arms extend straight out but low, just a few inches off the floor.

Your legs should only be as low as you can go without shaking, and without your lower spine pulling up off the mat.

4) Five short breaths in and 5 short breaths out (like sniffing in and out) go along with a controlled up and down pumping of the arms.

This is a small pumping action - be sure to keep your shoulders relaxed.

5) To finish: Keep your spine curved as you bring the knees in to your chest. Grasp your knees, and then allow your upper spine and head to roll, sequentially, back to the floor. Take a deep breath in and out.

The Roll Up



The roll up is well known as a foundation exercise for the Pilates flat abs effect, among other benefits.

- 1) Lie flat on your back, arms stretched above your head, ribcage down.
- 2) Inhale: Leave your shoulders down and your scapula settled in your back as you bring your arms overhead, nod your chin and begin to curl your upper body forward.
- 3) Exhale: Continue rolling up off floor as you deepen the scoop of the abs and reach your arms forward, parallel to your legs.
- 4) Inhale: Begin with a deep pull in of the lower abs to start to roll back down.
- 5) Exhale: Continue to roll down, one vertebrae at a time.

Repeat up to six times.

Single Straight Leg Stretch



Single straight legs is a challenging Pilates mat exercise that works abdominal endurance and stretches the backs of the legs.

(This is a different exercise than [single leg stretch](#).)

- 1) Begin lying on the mat with legs extended toward the ceiling. Legs and heels are together in [Pilates stance](#), rotated slightly outward from the hips.
- 2) Extend your spine, pull in your abdominals, and curl your upper body up off the mat. The tips of the shoulder blades touch the mat.
- 3) Grasp an ankle, or below the knee if you have tight hamstrings, and stretch the other leg out at a 45 degree angle.

Adjust the angle of the outstretched leg to make the exercise more or less difficult. The lower the leg, the harder the abdominals have to work to maintain alignment.

- 4) **Inhale** and pull your leg toward you, pulsing it toward you twice, increasing your stretch each time.

Switch legs.

- 5) **Exhale** and pull your leg toward you, pulsing it toward you twice, increasing your stretch each time.

Switch legs.

Repeat each set 6 to 10 times.

Choose a Counter Stretch



It is important to balance your routine with exercises that work opposing muscles. The flat abs series works the spine and abs in [flexion](#), a forward curve. Now would be a good time to choose an [extension](#) exercise or two.

Some good choices: [swimming](#) or [swan](#)

Criss Cross



Criss cross puts a special emphasis on the obliques. The obliques aid postural stabilization, but they are more involved in flexion and rotation of the spine. One of the big benefits of working the obliques is that they help define the waist.

1. Lie on your back in [neutral spine](#), shins up - parallel to the floor.
2. Place your hands behind your head, supporting the base of the skull, elbows wide.
3. Leaving the pelvis in a neutral position (not tucked or hyper-extended), scoop the abdominals and curl the chin and shoulders off the mat.

Inhale

4. **Exhale:** Extend your left leg out straight at a 45 degree angle. Keep your elbows wide and chest open as you rotate your torso so that your left armpit is reaching for your right knee.
5. **Inhale:** Switch legs, bringing your trunk through center.
6. **Exhale:** Extend your right leg, and rotate your upper body toward your left knee.

Repetitions: Start with 6 and work your way up to 10.

Tip: You must keep a stable, neutral pelvis as you rotate the spine. No tucking, tilting, or rocking please!

Double Straight Leg Lowers



Double straight leg lowers is very effective at working both the upper and lower abdominals. Provided that you do it correctly, this is an ideal [core strength](#) and flat ab builder.

Follow these step by step instructions and learn to protect your back as you get a great abdominal workout.

- 1) **Prep:** Lie on your back with your legs straight up toward the ceiling.
Place your hands behind your head, keeping your elbows wide and chest open.
- 2) **Inhale**
Exhale: Pull your abdominals down to the floor. Allow that motion to press your lower back into the floor. At the same time, curl your upper torso up off the floor.
- 3) **Inhale:** Your abdominals are pulled in, and your lower back pressed to mat.
Lower your legs, thinking of lengthening them at the same time.

Take your legs as low as you can with control and good alignment. Do not let your back pop up off the mat. Use your upper abs to maintain the lift of the chest, and don't try to hold yourself up by pulling on your head and neck with your elbows and hands!

- 4) **Exhale:** With control, deepen the abs even more as you return the legs upright.

Repeat the exercise 6 to 8 times.

Set Up



- Lie on your back and extend your legs straight up toward the ceiling. Rotate the legs out slightly, keeping the heels together and inner legs pulled in the center line, in Pilates stance.
- Place your hands behind your head, keeping the elbows and wide and chest open.
- Inhale and on the exhale, pull your abdominals down to the floor. Allow that motion to press your lower back into the floor as you curl your upper torso up off the floor. You will maintain this core strength torso position throughout the exercise.

Modify this exercise by leaving your head down. This is a good way to work up to this challenging exercise. If you leave your head down you can have your arms stretched out along your sides, palms down. Keep the chest open. You may also want to try placing your hands under your hips. This helps relieve a lot of pressure on the lower back.

Leg Lowers and Lifts



- **Inhale:** Keeping abdominals pulled in and the back pressed to mat, lengthen your legs out of your hips as you lower them.

Go only as far as you can maintain control and good alignment. Do not let your back pop up off the mat. Use your upper abs. to maintain the lift of the chest. Don't try to hold yourself up by pulling on your head and neck with the elbows and hands(a common temptation)!

- **Exhale:** With control deepen the abs. even more as you return the legs upright.
- **Check your position** - Pilates stance, open chest, wide elbows, abdominals pulled in.
- **Repeat** the exercise 6 - 8 times.

Protect your back! This is a challenging exercise to do correctly. Try working up to it by leaving your head down, and whatever you do, do not let the lower back peel up off the mat as you lower your legs - use your [powerhouse](#) and keep those abs. pulled in.

Breathe. Your abs. are pulled in and working hard, so this is a good opportunity to practice breathing deeply into your back and sides.

How To Do The Pilates Hundred



The hundred is a [classic Pilates mat exercise](#). You will be asked to perform it during the beginning of almost any Pilates class you take.

The hundred is a dynamic warm-up for the abdominals and lungs. It requires that you coordinate your breath with the movement, and be strong and graceful at the same time. It is challenging, but the hundred is an easy exercise to modify (make harder or easier). See the tips at the end of the exercise description for modification ideas.

Difficulty: Average

Time Required: 5 min.

Here's How:

1. Lie on your back with your legs bent in [tabletop](#) position with your shins and ankles parallel to the floor.

Inhale.

2. *Exhale:* Bring your head up with your chin down and, using your abs, curl your upper spine up off the floor. Keep the shoulders sliding down and engaged in the back. Your gaze is down into the [scoop of the abdominal muscles](#).

Stay here and *inhale*.

3. *Exhale:* At the same time, deepen the pull of the abs and extend your arms and legs. Your legs reach toward where the wall and ceiling meet in front of you. You can adjust them higher if need be, or lower for more advanced work. They should only be as low as you can go without shaking and without the lower spine pulling up off the mat.
Your arms extend straight and low, just a few inches off floor, with the fingertips reaching for the far wall.

4. Hold your position.

Take five short breaths in and five short breaths out (like sniffing in and puffing out). While doing so, move your arms in a controlled up and down manner - a small but dynamic pumping of the arms.

Be sure to keep your shoulders and neck relaxed. It is the abdominal muscles that should be doing all the work.

5. Do a cycle of 10 full breaths. Each cycle is five short in-breaths and then five short out-breaths.

The arms pump up and down -- about a 6-8 inch pump -- in unison with your breath.

Keep your abs scooped, your back flat on the floor, and your head an extension of your spine, with the gaze down. OK - not hard!

*Breathing big is important. Breathe into your back and sides.

[Learn about lateral breathing](#)

6. To finish: Keep your spine curved as you bring your knees in toward your chest. Grasp your knees and roll your upper spine and head back to the floor. Take a deep breath in and out.

Tips:

1. To modify the hundred: You can keep your legs in [tabletop](#) position. You can also do the exercise with your knees bent and the feet flat on the floor, lifting only the upper body.

People with upper back and neck issues can do this exercise with the legs extended or tabletop but the head down on the floor.

2. To make the hundred more challenging: Lower your legs. Do not lower your legs past where you can control the movement (the photo is an advanced version with the legs very low). Don't let your spine peel up off the floor as you lower the legs.
3. Watch an online video demonstration of the hundred. See: [The Hundred, Pilates Video](#)
4. Equipment: All you need is an exercise mat.