

Tips for Success

Increasing Lower Back Strength

One question I'm sometimes asked is how to increase strength and flexibility in the lower back. The concern was that, with hiking being such a crucial part of Laser sailing, the lower back takes most of the strain and is often the part of the body that gives out first. In this article, I'll share with you some of my best practices for improving posture and some stretching and exercise tips to help you avoid lower back pain.

To create a stronger and more flexible lower back let's start with the basics.

First your posture - the better your posture, the more chance your muscles have to strengthen and reduce your susceptibility to injury or pain. Regardless of whether you spend your day sitting at a desk, standing or being active, you need to maintain correct posture at all times. Many of us have a tendency to slouch forward creating a strain on the back, which may eventually lead to aches and pains.

Be aware of how you hold yourself, even when you are walking. Imagine balancing a book on your head - stand up straight, roll your shoulders back and push your chest out slightly. Then lift your chin so that you look ahead and not down. If you need help, you can try standing with your back up against a wall. This will help you to learn how your body feels when its in the correct position - with your shoulders touching the wall!. Now remember this feeling whenever you're sitting or walking and make the effort to stretch yourself up into that same position.

Once you've mastered standing correctly, you can move onto stretching the muscles of the lower back.

- Stand with your feet together and your arms at your sides.
- Starting with your head, slowly roll your spine down toward the floor. Try to imagine each vertebrae rolling forward one at a time. Roll all the way down until your hands are as close to the floor as they can get.
- Stay rolled over for about 30 seconds - don't forget to breathe!
- Now roll back up to the upright position. Again imagine each vertebrae rolling up.

When you are in the middle you may feel a pull in your lower back. This is normal. Many of us rush through these stretches and therefore don't really work the intended muscles. Remember to go slowly and if you feel any pain don't go any further. You may want to practice this exercise when you wake up in the morning and before going to bed at night. You can also do this in the shower where the water helps relax the muscles and makes the stretch a little easier. Each time you repeat this exercise you should be able to stretch a little further.

Another stretch that is very effective is also very simple.

- Lie flat on your stomach on the floor.
- Stretch your arms out straight over your head and place your palms flat on the floor in front of you.
- Keep your head facing down toward the floor so your spine is in a completely straight line. You may find it more comfortable to place a small cushion or pillow under your forehead.
- Raise your right arm straight up off the floor about 1-2 inches. At the same time lift your left leg straight off the floor the same distance.
- Hold for about five seconds making sure you don't bend your arms or legs.
- Lower your arm and leg and now do the same with your left arm and right leg.
- Repeat this 8-10 times on each side to start with and gradually and work up to 15-20 repetitions.

It's important when you're trying to strengthen your lower back to make sure you don't forget about your abdominal muscles. These two sets of muscles work together and therefore are only as strong as the weaker one. Crunches are a great way to strengthen both the lower back and abdominals. While most of us are familiar with a basic crunch you may not be aware of the hundreds of different variations. The one I'm going to explain below is a reverse crunch and this is one of my favorites.

- Lay on your back with your arms at your sides.
- Lift your legs straight into the air so your feet (soles?) are pointing up toward the ceiling.
- Now bend your knees so they are at a 90-degree angle. This is the basic starting and ending position.
- Roll up your shoulders and upper back and bring your knees towards your shoulders. Try not to break the form When you roll your knees toward your shoulders inhale and when you return your legs to the 90-degree position exhale.
- Start by doing 8-10 of these every other day. Then work up to XXXX everyday. Increase the amount that you do, as you feel comfortable. If you feel fatigued take a break from doing them.

During the whole exercise, keep your lower back touching the floor. Think of pulling your abdominals inward and upward. By doing this you will be tightening the abdominals and creating tension on them. Generate your movement from your abdominal muscles never releasing this tension. Make sure you do this exercise in a slow and controlled manner and remember not to tense your neck, but to keep it loose.

Don't forget you can exercise by doing other everyday activities like going for a walk! Walking at a moderate pace is a great way to work all your muscles. Remember to maintain good posture by keeping your back straight and shoulders back. Keep your abdominal muscles pulled in. Walk with your feet pointing straight in front of you and not turned out to the sides. Picture your body forming a straight line from head to toe. But also remember that this doesn't mean that you have to have a stiff military walk. Let your arms swing freely and enjoy yourself.

Last but not least practice hiking. After all isn't this your main goal? You want to be able to hike like there's no tomorrow! Once you start working on strengthening your lower back, hiking will become easier. However it is exercise in itself and requires practice. The more you do it the stronger your back, abdominals and hiking ability will become.

Once again if there is a topic you would like me to address or you have any questions/comments please email me at meke@sailfit.com.