The Truth About Core Strength: Why It's Not About Crunches
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LifeMotion Physical Therapy

Orthopedic | Pelvic Health | Balance



The Truth About Core Strength: Why It's Not About Crunches

What Is the "Core," Really?

If you've been told to "strengthen your core" but still deal with back pain, hip discomfort, or pelvic symptoms, you're not alone. Many people work hard on their core and see little improvement - not because they're doing nothing, but because they're doing the wrong things for how the core actually functions.

The core is more than just abs. It's a coordinated system of muscles that supports your spine, pelvis, and rib cage during movement and daily life.

This system includes:

- The diaphragm (breathing muscle)
- Deep abdominal muscles
- Pelvic floor muscles
- Muscles along the spine and hips



Rather than acting as a rigid brace, a healthy core adapts providing stability while still allowing movement. True core function is about **coordination, timing, and control**, not just brute strength.

Why Core Weakness or Poor Coordination Leads to Pain

The core functions like a **pressurized canister** that supports the spine and pelvis. The top of the canister is the diaphragm, the bottom is the pelvic floor, and the sides include the deep abdominal and spinal muscles.

When this system is working well:

- Pressure is evenly distributed
- The spine and pelvis are supported during movement
- Muscles activate and relax at the appropriate times

When there is weakness or **poor coordination**, the canister loses its ability to manage pressure effectively. This may occur with breath-holding, excessive muscle tension, or poor activation of the deep abdominal or pelvic floor muscles.

Over time, this can contribute to:

- Low back pain or stiffness
- Hip pain or instability
- Pelvic pain, pressure, or leakage
- Reduced efficiency during lifting, walking, or exercise

These issues often reflect a system that isn't working together efficiently, not a lack of effort.

Why Traditional Core Exercises Often Miss the Mark

Many people consistently perform crunches, planks, or "ab workouts" yet continue to struggle with pain or instability.

Traditional core exercises often:

- Emphasize surface muscles over deep stabilizers
- Encourage breath-holding rather than coordinated breathing
- Increase pressure without teaching control
- Fail to translate to daily movement or sport

For some individuals, especially those with pelvic pain, postpartum changes, or chronic back issues, aggressive strengthening can worsen symptoms rather than resolve them.

Common Signs Your Core Isn't Working Efficiently

Core dysfunction doesn't always look like weakness.

It may present as:

- Recurrent low back pain
- Hip or pelvic discomfort
- Abdominal doming during lifting, or exercise
- Incontinence during coordination
- Difficulty stabilizing during single-leg or balance tasks
- Pain during or after workouts despite "strong" muscles

These signs often indicate a coordination issue rather than a lack of strength.

The LifeMotion Treatment Approach: Building Functional Core Support

1. Early Stage: Restoring Breathing and Coordination

In early care, we focus on helping the core system work together again.

This may include:

- Breathing retraining to restore diaphragm–pelvic floor coordination
- Gentle activation of deep abdominal muscles **without breathholding**
- Reducing excessive muscle tension or guarding
- Education on posture and pressure management during daily activities
- Use of **specialized tools to improve awareness and feedback**, such as the **Core Coach**, which helps patients learn how to activate deep core muscles appropriately during breathing and movement

This stage lays the foundation for safe and effective strengthening.

2. Mid Stage: Progressive Strength With Control

Once coordination improves, we gradually introduce strengthening that mirrors how the body functions in daily life without excessive bracing or breathholding.

This stage may include:

- **Upright core and hip strengthening, such as:**
  - Sit-to-stand progressions with controlled breathing
  - Supported squats focusing on rib cage and pelvic alignment
- **Isometric and controlled strengthening, including:**
  - Modified plank variations emphasizing breathing and alignment
  - Split stance work to improve pelvic and trunk stability
- **Anti-movement and rotational control exercises, such as:**
  - Pallof press variations to train trunk stability without excessive strain
  - Controlled rotational reaches to improve coordination between the core and hips
- **Single leg stability and balance training, including:**
  - Single-leg stance with upper body movement
  - Step-ups or step-downs with attention to alignment and load control

Exercises are selected and progressed based on symptoms, goals, and how the body responds, not just how strong someone feels.

3. Later Stage: Strength That Transfers to Life(Motion) and Sport

In the final phase, we ensure core strength holds up under real-world demands.

This includes:

- Dynamic strengthening with rotation, load, and speed
- Return-to-exercise or sport-specific training
- Education on self-management and symptom monitoring
- Customized home programs for long-term success

This phase is critical for preventing recurrence and restoring confidence in movement.

Typical Progression Timeline

- **3–6 weeks** for improved coordination and symptom reduction
- **6–12+ weeks** for strength integration into higher-level activity

Progress varies based on history, goals, and consistency.

Key Takeaways

- Core strength is about coordination, not crunches
- The diaphragm, pelvic floor, and deep abdominals must work together
- Breath-holding and over-bracing can increase symptoms
- A personalized, whole-body approach leads to better outcomes

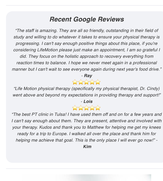
Start the Year With Strength That Actually Supports You

If traditional core workouts haven't helped—or have made symptoms worse—there may be a missing piece. Our team specializes in building core strength that supports your body for daily life, exercise, and performance. Call us or reach out on our website to schedule an appointment today!

LifeMotion Gives Back at the Food Bank!

Our team kicked off the new year by volunteering at the Food Bank of Eastern Oklahoma, helping sort and pack rice for our community. **We bagged 3,240 pounds of rice!** It was a meaningful way to start the year working together, serving others, and giving back to the city we're proud to be part of.





Recent Google Reviews

"The staff is amazing. They are all so friendly, outstanding in their field of study and willing to do whatever it takes to ensure your physical therapy is progressing. I can't say enough positive things about this place, if you're considering LifeMotion please make an appointment, I am so grateful I did. They focus on the holistic approach to recovery everything from reaction times to balance. I hope we never meet again in a professional manner but I can't wait to see everyone again during next year's food drive."
Ray

⭐⭐⭐⭐⭐

"Life Motion physical therapy (specifically my physical therapist, Dr. Cindy) went above and beyond my expectations in providing therapy and support!"
Lora

⭐⭐⭐⭐⭐

"The best PT clinic in Tulsa! I have used them off and on for a few years and I can't say enough about them. They are present, attentive and involved with your therapy. Kudos and thank you to Matthew for helping me get my knees ready for a trip to Europe. I walked all over the place and thank him for helping me achieve that goal. This is the only place I will ever go now!" -
Kim



A Message From Ryan

Core strength comes up constantly in our clinic, whether it's folks battling persistent back pain, working through postpartum recovery, or simply wanting to move more freely in daily life. As this month's newsletter lays out, it's rarely about grinding through endless crunches or chasing a visible six-pack. *Real core strength is about smart coordination: getting your deep stabilizers, diaphragm, pelvic floor, and surrounding muscles to work together smoothly.* It creates adaptable stability that supports your spine and pelvis without locking everything up.

We've seen patient after patient get frustrated with traditional "ab workouts" that leave them sore but no better off. The breakthrough often comes when we shift focus to proper pressure management, breathing patterns, and timing of muscle activation. The results? **Less pain, better function, and quicker progress than expected.** If you are having low back pain, don't wait, come see us!

We're kicking off 2026 stronger than ever at LifeMotion! I'm thrilled to share that we've expanded our core and pelvic health services with advanced training. Dr. Hartley Bowman has completed her training with the Institute of Clinical Excellence (ICE) and is now a Certified Pelvic Specialist. This means even more personalized programs to help with everything from low back issues to athletic performance. Plus, a big shoutout to our community, we were honored to make Tulsa People's A-List Hall of Fame, thanks to your votes and trust!

The new year always brings a sense of fresh starts and new beginnings. After the holidays, many of us feel ready to reset, focus on health, and build better habits for the months ahead. If your goals include moving without pain, feeling stronger in your core, or simply regaining confidence in daily activities, now is the perfect time to take that step. Our expert Doctors of Physical Therapy are here to help with orthopedic, pelvic, balance, and now even more focused core rehab. Give us a call at **918-574-2575** or schedule online, we'd love to get you moving confidently in 2026!

PS - Many of you have asked about my plantar fascia injury. I am proud to say I made it out of the boot and am back performing modified exercises and walking over a mile. I have not fully recovered but with the help of our awesome clinical team and our Chattanooga Focused Shockwave unit, I am getting better each week!

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