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Fitness expert Kathleen Stewart explains the importance of core conditioning to improve your abdominal area

Welcome to Fitness Matters. I hope you're finding my articles useful and have managed to do some of the workouts. I'm returning to the subject of core conditioning using one of my favourite pieces of equipment, the Swiss ball.

During menopausal transition many of us, regardless of size, shape or fitness level, notice an increase in abdominal fat deposition. This can be distressing, especially for women who previously had a shapely and slim mid-section. Finding clothing that flatters becomes a challenge as that unsightly abdominal bulge can ruin the

silhouette of a close-fitting outfit. This can result in feelings of low self-esteem and a negative body image as we lament the loss our youthful bodies.

There is no easy solution but there is much we can do to help the appearance of our abdominal area. The crux is a well-structured, targeted exercise programme combined with good nutrition. It has to be progressive and consistent. A hit and miss approach will not help your core.

Traditionally, the abdominal crunch or sit up was the exercise of choice to improve the abs but these exercises are based on the principle of isola-



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Getting to the core of the matter

tion, targeting one or two muscles exclusively. In reality our core muscles function as a unit with the workload being shared by muscles in the abdominal area, lower back and gluteals. Effective core conditioning will target these muscles rather than focusing on the "6 pack" or rectus abdominus muscle

which, when over-exercised, can become hypertonic. This in turn, can lead to a muscular imbalance and the erector spinae muscles of the lumbar spine can weaken, leading ultimately to a diminished lumbar curve. This posture is often observed in former devotees of the abdominal crunch, particu-

larly in those who performed hundreds every day in the absence of complementary lower back exercises.

However, while conditioning exercises will tighten and tone your core muscles, they alone will not shift stubborn abdominal fat deposits. A progressive whole body resistance training

programme using kettlebells, dumbbells, body weight or other equipment is crucial.

High-intensity interval training is also a valuable fitness tool to boost metabolism and blitz the body fat. An integrated approach will yield best results. Some dietary modification may be needed for optimum results.

Extreme dieting will not help. In fact the reverse may be true as yo-yo dieting will ultimately lead to abdominal weight gain.

An important step is to eat more "cleaner" home-cooked meals rather than processed foods, which tend to be high in sugar, artificial ingredients and poor quality fats.

Here is a mini-core conditioning workout using the Swiss Ball. Each exercise flows into the other, making it time efficient as well as effective. Aim to perform each exercise 8-16 times. Once the routine is mastered, it can be repeated 2-3 times, and done 2-3 times a week. Supplement with whole body resistance training and HIIT for maximum effectiveness. I've included these types of workout in previous issues.

Supine jackknife
Lying on your back, place your feet on the ball, draw your knees into your chest and curl your upper body up off the floor, supporting your head with your hands. This is your start position. Slowly push

the ball away from you, while simultaneously lying down and stretching your arms overhead. Slowly return to start position, breathing out as you crunch up and in as you stretch.

Shoulder bridge
Lie down with your head on the floor and place your calves on the ball. Draw it close to your body. Arms should be relaxed by your sides. To increase difficulty, start with the ball further away from you, with legs straighter. Squeeze your glutes and lift your hips off the floor to a bridge position as shown, simultaneously stretching one arm overhead. Slowly lower hips to floor and repeat, raising opposite arm. If this is too challenging, keep arms by sides until you have mastered the bridge.

Oblique supine jackknife
From the same start position as (1), push ball out at an angle rather than straight in front of you. Arms should be outstretched in opposite direction. Slowly return to start and repeat opposite side.

Next issue
Kettlebell conditioning



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