

Fitness evolutions

The past month I have had the great privilege of attending two of the premier educational events in the world of fitness and strength & conditioning. Here is one of the developments that has been taking place over the last several years that I consider to me of prime importance to long term fitness and health.

Abdominal crunches are out!

This is not really new as the research has been coming out for a number of years but any high repetition exercising that involves the flexing of the lumbar region (low back) has now been proven to cause compression of the lumbar discs. This activity over time will decrease the longevity of your lower back. What this means from an exercise standpoint is that if you are shortening the distance between your ribcage and your pelvis you are shortening the useful life of the discs in your low back. Or in other words the crunch has been “crunching” our lumbar spine!

Other exercises that fall under this category are sit-ups, reverse crunches, and probably many types of leg raises.

Exercises that require rotation in the same lumbar region are also not recommended, combining the two motions of crunching with rotation is even more damaging. Machines that mimic the crunch or rotational movements offer no protection and because of their restrictive nature are probably the worst choice.

Two of the more suitable methods for training the abdominal region of the core are:

Plank exercises:

The term refers to the body being held straight like a plank of wood usually in a horizontal position, planks can be as challenging as any core training exercise you can do and when done correctly will minimize damage to the lumbar discs and actually improve your posture and overall efficiency of movement.

Asymmetrical carries:

Exercises that involve carrying loads on one side of the body are also proving to be highly effective for core strengthening. Often called farmers walks or suitcase carries a weight is carried in one hand at arm's length like a suitcase. Other variations involve carrying a weight held in one hand at the shoulder, or with one hand at arm's length above the shoulder. Properly performed asymmetrical carries will have many benefits in longevity and performance.

Remember that just because we always have done something a certain way does not mean we were doing the right thing. The research is out and it is time for change. The millions of people who suffer from back pain are a testament that in the past we have been doing at least a few things wrong.

It has been over four years since I eliminated all sit-up or crunching exercises from all of my training routines as well as those of my clients. At this point nobody misses the sit-ups but nobody thinks the other core exercises are any easier and for everyone core strength has improved!