

Toni Talks | Humanity Matters

Episode 2 | Part 2

How to build a strong core and avoid lower back injuries

Welcome to Toni Talks, Humanity Matters. I'm your host, Toni Julian, and this is part two of a very important topic that most of you can relate to: back pain! Almost all back pain begins with a weakened core. So, in episode two, part one, I talked about how our behavior impacts and contributes to low back problems.

I shared which muscles make up your core and how to strengthen it. Through my four-point exercise, I call *the rotisserie* that takes only 10 minutes a day. So, if you missed it, check it out before starting here.

Next, I'd like to talk about some exercise modifications so you can reduce your lower back strain. One test that you can do, and I'd be careful about this, is we want to find out if you're lying on your back, where should your legs go? If you are doing bike abs, for example, or if you're doing any sort of exercise where your legs are in an up position...say they're up straight and you're doing toe touches, laying on your back, whatever it might be.

It's good to know where you should target your heels. For example, you're lying on your back and your legs are straight up, you are at 90 degrees with the mat. If you slowly lower your legs down and don't do this yet, please. But if you slowly lower your legs down, you will find a point, if you have a weak lower back, where your lower back comes off the mat.

Now, if you would do what we did before, which is making sure that you're drawing your belly button in, you're bringing it toward the spine, you're engaging your core, and your back is flat to the mat. And again, not pushing hard, but just comfortably so you are really supported, your legs are up straight.

The more you bring them down toward the ground, the more strain there's going to be on your back. So, if there are exercises, for example, where you're lying on your back and you have to lift your legs up a little bit off the floor, that is going to be straining your back if you're lower, if your lower back is not strong enough.

There may be some things that you do say, we'll take bike abs as an example, if you are kicking your legs out and they're low, say they're 10 inches off the floor, that's going to be a whole lot more strain on your lower back if you're not ready for it. Then if they were at a 45-degree angle, say your legs are straight up and you go into that very strong core position we were talking about, and you lower them 45 degrees, so it's halfway down to the ground, not straight up, but you're about halfway there. That may be where you need to keep your legs. If you're doing exercises on your back, the safest thing for you to do is keep your knees bent and on your mat and not have them up in the air in the very beginning, but

this is something you can progress to, but as you are progressing, just recognize that the lower they are, the more the strain is on your backs. You're going to want to keep your legs higher in the air until you know you're ready and you can progress from there.

Another thing you could do is when stretching, rather than standing and touching your toes --that puts a lot of strain in your lower back--what you can do is sit on a mat with your legs out straight, and what this does is it stabilizes your pelvis and your hips and you can then lean over and touch your toes.

You're going to want to keep your back straight and not round. And just go over and get as close as you can get. One of my clients, she couldn't even get her body to sit up in that 90 degree angle, so we used a band for her and she was able to kind of wrap that around her feet and just pull herself gently so that she could start to do these stretches and become limber enough.

Her glutes were tied, her hamstrings, her calves. So, don't be disappointed if you can't really even stretch that far yet. Maybe you are, maybe you're great at it, and that's wonderful. I tend to talk to, uh, and address people who may need modifications. And that's what this section is all about.

If you are biking, say on an exercise bike, if you're at the gym, you will notice there are two kinds of bikes. One is just the regular cycling. Bike that they use in the spin classes and there's also an incumbent bike and that one has back support. And here again, your hips and your back are fully supported and that would be a good way to go next.

My number one exercise for stretching the lower back. Now this is important because all of the muscles in our body, we are a kinetic chain, which means everything is connected. But there is one muscle that is responsible for lower back compression, and it's called the psoas. So as if you haven't heard of it before, it's spelled P-S-O-A-S, and it's a very deep core muscle. It attaches to the five lower lumbar vertebrae and this particular muscle, if you can envision it, it looks a little bit like your forearm in the way that it's shaped from your fingertips to your elbow. The fingertips part, each one attaches to a vertebra. So those are the five vertebrae there. And that all comes together, this long muscle, and it'll attach to the front of your femur, which is your long leg bone between your hip and your knee, right? It's also part of the hip flexor. It is responsible for bringing your knee up when you walk, it's responsible for lifting your leg when you're driving to accelerate and brake in the car.

So, when that muscle is tight, you can just imagine how much tension and force it and that tension creates pressure on your lower spine. So, one thing we want to do to stretch that, there is one stretch that I know of in all my years of training, and there is one chiropractic kind of maneuver, and I'll tell you about that first.

If you've been to a chiropractor, if they've ever tried to stretch your psoas, it is one of the weirdest feelings ever, if you've ever had it done, if you're lying on your back, they'll actually kind of dig in. You need to inhale, and then when you exhale, you relax your abdomen and the chiropractor's able to get in there and actually try to rub out that.

As a muscle, and it's kind of a typically creepy, very weird feeling. It's not my favorite, so I haven't done that in a really long time. My favorite is just something you can do no matter where you are. And that is stretching your psoas and it's a very simple stretch. There are two ways to go about this.

If your knees are having problems, if they're sore, if you can't be on your knees on a mat, then you can stand doing this. I'll talk about the standing version first. If you are standing, your hips are forward. Take your right leg and take a step back into a lunge. You don't need to do a deep lunge, just a split stance.

Maybe your feet are two, three feet apart. Okay? The leg that is back, the right leg that is back, you're going to take your right arm--so it's the same side--and you're going to take your arm, you're going to go straight up in the air with it. So straight up like you're pointing at 12 o'clock okay. Then once you're in that position, check your hips.

Your hips should be in alignment. They should be squared with the front of the room and not torqued or kind of twisted out. So nice and straight. You're keeping your hips straight toward the direction that you're looking. Then you're going to take that arm that's outstretched, your right arm, and you're going to lean and you're going to lean in towards your body, and at this point as you're leaning it is probably, you're probably going to hit 11 o'clock instead of 12 o'clock. You're going to go over a little, it's not going to be a lot. And what you may feel is, you may feel a stretching in your hip flexor on the right side, and it's a very, very deep muscle.

Once you feel that tension, just be very gentle about it and you can keep your arm up and tilt it over and you want to hold that stretch for 30 seconds. The reason we hold stretches for that long is there are little organs or sensors in our body and they're called the Golgi Tendon Organs. And what they do is they are just trying to protect our body so our muscles are made of these muscle spindles and they can relax and contract.

And when you are putting that sort of a stressor or attention on your muscles, you want them to relax, right? That's the whole goal of stretching. You have a tight muscle, you want it to relax, but the body--these little tendon organs--they send a message out for that muscle to contract. They're thinking "we don't want this muscle to stretch out too much. We want to protect our body so we're going to tighten up". Well, they will stay tight for about 30 seconds so if you can hang in there for 30 seconds, just a really nice gentle stretch, you can override and they will finally start to relax a little bit. So that's how you can get past that. So that is the standing option.

The option where you can actually use your mat on your knees is you will go into that same one and what you're going to do is just drop that back knee out down to the mat. Now here, your right knee will be on the mat. Your left leg will be bent, your front foot will be flat on the floor, and you're going to go into that same position. You'll raise your right arm up, and then you're going to tilt in to the other side.

You may want to balance yourself if there is a little coffee table or something that you can hold onto if you're feeling a little bit wobbly, most people don't need it, but if you do that, absolutely fine. I do that sometimes myself. And you're going to hold that for 30 seconds. Now either way, whenever you do something on one side, yet do it on the other side because you, we want you to be balanced out.

That is my number one exercise for stretching. You do want to foam roll, stretch out the rest of your body as much as you can. That's another topic, but this is the number one way you can help reduce that tension on your lower back is by stretching your so as P. S. O. A. S. remember what that is! It's an important muscle.

Next up, we're going to talk about pain and inflammation. Like what you can do if you do have lower back pain. If you do have inflammation as a sports nutrition coach and a regular coach in the areas of nutrition, and for all my years of studying, I have learned a lot about inflammatory situations. And there are a few tricks that I found that could be of help to you if you want to give them a try or consider them or talk to your doctor about them. Some anti-inflammatories are natural and some are prescription OTC or over the counter. And I prefer starting with the natural anti-inflammatories as supplements because I know the others can cause side effects.

One of the first natural anti-inflammatory is Bromelain, and that is found in pineapple. It's an enzyme and you can eat pineapple, which is anti-inflammatory of course, or you can take the supplement, either one. I really like Bromelain because it is natural. There are no side effects with it. It's not going to upset your stomach or cause ulcers or GERD, which is gastroesophageal reflux disease, which I have had from taking too much ibuprofen many, many years ago. I tend to be that Canary in the coal mine where I am sensitive to things and not everybody is. So, I tend to err on the side of caution a little bit, especially when it comes to sensitive systems.

Bromelain is a great thing to try. You can get it at local health food stores or online shopping. Another anti-inflammatory would be your Omega-3's. Now we get plenty of Omega-6 and 9's, that are in the form of canola oils and other types of fats, but what you could do is really amp up on your Omega-3's.

These are natural anti-inflammatories found in foods. You can also get them in capsule form. But what I love to do is incorporate anti-inflammatory diets so that everything you put into your diet has an anti-inflammatory effect. So, things like olive oil, avocados, and flaxseed meal--and flaxseeds, by the way, you have to grind them because they don't break down in the seed form. Freshly ground flaxseed is wonderful. A great source of Omega-3's. Wild salmon, and I always do wild instead of farmed, it's just much better for you, way less fat and much more nutritionally beneficial for you.

And then another natural anti-inflammatory is curcumin. I hope I'm saying it right. Curcumin. Curcumin as a supplement or in a tea, and I've taken this pretty consistently. I have it every day just to help knock down inflammation in my body. And then as you're pulling in these anti-inflammatory foods, you want to push out any foods that are inflammatory. So, all foods like fast food, sugar, alcohol, caffeine...saturated fats, highly, highly processed foods. You want to stay away from anything that is going to take it away. You can't, you know, really have a glass of wine and say, or some processed foods and say, I'm going to take this bromelain and it's going to counter it. It, it probably will not. The minute you eat anything inflammatory, it's going to create a cascade of chemical reactions in your body.

And when you are having back issues, nerve issues, that's all very inflammatory. We want to calm all that down. We do not want to piss off our nerves. Once they're mad at us, it takes a while for them to calm down. We want to really just pamper our bodies from an exercise standpoint, a stretching standpoint, a resting standpoint, and a nutritional standpoint.

All of these things really help. When I was going through these back issues many years ago, 10 years ago, that I was telling you about, I had a problem with ibuprofen. And, uh, if you do take it, there are regular over the counter doses or you can talk to your physician about prescription doses, but always, always take it with food.

That's really important. I ended up having GERD, as I mentioned, from taking ibuprofen. I was taking it every day for weeks, trying to get my lower back to calm down for me, and I just had this really strange reaction--in idiosyncratic reaction--which is probably only me in the entire world would have this reaction. But what happened is it created GERD. So, I had all this acid from my stomach that went up my esophagus. And what happened is the esophagus was affected and it created a cramp in my neck, which affected my carotid artery and it actually inhibited the blood flow to my brain, which was just the strangest thing ever.

And I remember trying to work out, trying to go on walks. I could maybe walk 15 to 20 feet and I felt like there was just like this sludge, this cement instead of blood in my body trying to make its way around my body and it just wasn't getting flow to my brain because of this cramp in my neck. I ended up being hospitalized and turned out that it was GERD.

Who knew, you know, something that just seemed not so bad, could have such an impact. This is why I'm cautious about over the counter medications. There are certainly many, many times and situations where they're completely important, but if your doctor is in agreement with it and I would check with them, try or at least suggest some of these natural anti-inflammatories first.

In addition to that, do change your diet for as long as you can for a period of time to make it less inflammatory because all of that together is going to really, really help. And the other thing is what you can do for yourself is get plenty of sleep. That is when, again, back to that laying down position, you are taking all that compression, all that gravity off your spine. You're allowing it to calm down. You're allowing it to heal. You're allowing those muscles to heal. And I would say it's not ideal to have full bed rest either. There have been studies and research on that where it's not advantageous to just not move for a couple of weeks laying down.

Sleep is the only time that your body heals. The rest of the day mix up your movement, walk ice, lay down, do some good things for your body and give your spine a break. Some things you can do, and I've learned a lot ergonomically, as you are moving about your day is to have some things in your home and in your office.

Some support. So lower back support, for example, if you're sitting at the kitchen table, then have a cushion behind your back so your back is supported. Make sure that when you are seated, you're in chair that is properly upholstered. You know, what is my biggest beef? I just thought about this is when you go to a doctor or you go into some public space, or even you go to a bank and you sit down and you talk with a teller, you might sit in a chair, you just sink in it because it's so old and so decrepit and there is no back support left in it. And you can actually feel the rails around the base of the chair digging into the back of your legs. That sets my back off like, like nothing else could. So just make sure that wherever you're sitting, if you have to sit like that, just say that you'll stand. But avoid those situations where you're going to be put into these uncomfortable positions where you don't have lower back support.

Another one might be at a park, sitting at a picnic table, or maybe there is some mass seating in a restaurant and you choose a table. I would see if you can choose seats that have backs on it versus seats that don't have backs on it. Your car is another place. Poor lumbar support in a car and you're driving and you can't really move around is another opportunity to set off that lower back.

Some cars, seats, as you know, have inflatable support, which is wonderful. If not, you can get a small lumbar cushion. I actually made one for my husband for his car because even though he drives a nice car, it had really terrible lumbar support bucket seats, and that really wasn't adequate for him.

Another ergonomic tip is stand up every 30 minutes and walk around and stretch. If you're sitting for an hour, two hours, three hours, that gravity and that poor posture as your body begins to fatigue. Your posture starts to erode and your lower back is going to get more and more impacted with that. So be sure to do that. Mix up your movements. Sit for a while, stand for a while, lay down for a while, ice a little bit.

You may have seen these hydraulic desks that have been out for a while. I have one for my home office. It's wonderful. I can sit down when I need to sit. I could stand in 20 minutes, raise it up a little bit and stand for a while. Or there are those sit/stand platforms for your PC that you can place on your desk. They're kind of desktop versions so you can elevate your computer or your laptop and be able to work from there and really mix it up. You can use your phone and set an alarm for 20 minutes, 30 minutes, wherever you feel comfortable and know that you're going to mix it up a little bit. After a while, uh, if you don't have an injury, you could start stretching more.

Gentle yoga is really great because they do a lot of these exercises from plank and downward dog and child's pose and cat cows. Things that will lengthen you, strengthen your core, help keep you firm and toned and, and even grounded, which I really love.

The last tip for your body is to drink plenty of water. There is a formula I want to share with you that's super easy, and I get that question a lot. How much water should I drink? The amount of water should be your body weight divided by two and that will equal the number of ounces that you need.

So, as mentioned earlier, be sure to seek out healthcare professionals. You can go to people that help support your back. Like chiropractors, physiatrists, orthopedic surgeons that specialize in the spine. And remember my core training, my core rotisserie exercise, and my number one stretch for the psoas. Prevention is medicine! You have to use it or you lose it and it doesn't take long, as I mentioned, and it's never too late to get strong to show up in this world as the positive, bright, and loving spirit that you are.

If you have topics that you're interested in, note them down below here. Leave a message. I would love to know what's on your mind and what you would like me to talk about or share with you. I appreciate you being on this journey with me and I am sending you prayers, healthy healing, and love and hugs from me to you. Until next time.

Toni

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