PILATES - STRENGTHENING WOMEN FROM WITHIN

If you’re a woman, training your core takes a different approach than that taken with a man. Every female I’ve ever taken for Pilates based core training over the last decade (that’s over 60,000 client consultations and counting), have all wanted one thing – that’s a flat stomach.

By Jade Winter

There is a critically important way to train the core for you to be able to achieve a truly flat stomach and it’s overlooked 95% of the time in gym based workouts.

The secret to effective core training and gaining a flat stomach is to not only reduce body fat but also to target and train the Transversus Abdominus. Without specifically targeting this muscle, the abdominal wall can continue to protrude and sag outwards and you may have the appearance of having a large or flabby stomach even if you don’t have much body fat in this area. This can be particularly true in the lower half of the abdomen (which is often a problem area for many women) where the Transversus Abdominus is and works most of its wonders.

Just doing sit ups is not going to get you to your goal of a flat stomach, in fact it may do the opposite! By only working the Rectus Abdominus (the six-pack muscles) and by doing thousands of crunches you may even be thickening the waist and not flattening the stomach at all. If you fail to train the Transversus Abdominus in conjunction with the rest of the abs (and reducing body fat) you may never achieve a truly flat stomach.

But, with simple training of the Transversus Abdominus (TA), your stomach can and will appear flatter, more toned and it will look like you’ve lost weight without even having lost a gram of fat!

Does it sound too good to be true? Well believe it, and take the time to learn how to activate your TA so that you can maximise your abdominal or core training in the gym and gain the best stomach flattening results.

WHERE IS THE TRANSVERSUS ABDOMINUS?
Let’s start from the outside and work inwards:

The Rectus Abdominus:
This is the least functional but most trained of all the abdominal muscles, as they are your traditional and much sought after ‘six-pack muscles’. Their role is to flex or bend the spine forward in a ‘sit up’ type action and that’s about it. The rectus abdominus plays a very small role in core stabilisation (contrary to most people’s belief) and they run from the ribcage below the chest, to the pubic bone.

Internal and External Obliques:
These muscles rotate the torso, so they are quite functional. They help to improve the tennis
or golf game, they also play a small role in stabilising the spine and aid in overall core stabilisation and strength. These muscles appear either side of the ‘six-pack’ and can often be seen going over the ribs and also around the love handle area. They will help - in conjunction with the TA - to draw in the waist, thus giving the waist a thinner and more hourglass appearance in women.

**Transversus Abdominus (TA)**

The Transversus Abdominus is the deepest and most important layer of stomach muscle, yet it’s the least trained. The TA’s role is to flatten the muscle, yet it’s the least trained. The most common symptom is the deepest and most

Abdominus: (TA)

Transversus

Whilst you can’t visually see you have a pelvic floor too). Pelvic floor (and yes guys, it works closely with the spine - as it’s the only stomach muscle to actually attach onto each of the lower vertebrae. Because of this reason, strengthening this muscle helps to reduce back pain and it also decreases the risk of injuring the lower back.

The TA is also the main core stabilising muscle and it works closely with the pelvic floor (and yes guys, you have a pelvic floor too). Whilst you can’t visually see the TA you can see it working and by training it the results can be dramatic, as it’s vital in flattening and toning the stomach. This in turn gives the body the appearance of being thinner without actually having lost any weight or fat.

If you’re a female and you want a flat stomach, or if you’re a male trainer who trains female clients, then training the TA is absolutely essential.

**The Pelvic Floor:**

The pelvic floor does typically pelvic floor type activities and works closely with the TA to aid in core stability and strength.

The female pelvic floor can often be weakened by occurrences such as child birth. In extreme cases a female can suffer from a pelvic floor prolapsed, which may or may not need surgery to repair. The most common symptom of pelvic floor weakness is stress incontinence, which is the passing of a small amount of urine when sneezing or coughing etc.

Most women know how to activate their pelvic floor, but focussing on it is often neglected when it comes to exercise. If you are a male trainer, you shouldn’t be afraid to ask your female clients if they suffer from pelvic floor weakness, as helping them to strengthen their pelvic floor can be life changing. Simply teaching how to activate the pelvic floor and then reminding your client to engage their pelvic floor before and whilst lifting weights, can often be enough to strengthen it considerably.

**HOW DO I TRAIN MY TA AND PELVIC FLOOR?**

To activate the Transversus Abdominus and pelvic floor, simply lie on your back with your feet on the floor and knees bent. Find the front of your hip bones (the part that’s pointing up towards the ceiling) and place your fingers on the hip bones. Next, simply roll the finger tips over these bones onto the inside of the hips so your finger tips are just one centimetre inside the bone. Apply some downward pressure on your fingers but you should be still touching the hip bones.

Now imagine you have a letter ‘T’ drawn on the surface of the stomach with the vertical line of the T starting at the pubic bone and going upwards towards the belly button. The horizontal axis of the T goes from one hip bone to the other. This is what we catch phrase as the ‘T-Zone’ at Studio Pilates International” to aid in imagery, memory and streamlining communication. Let’s focus first on the vertical axis of the ‘T’ which is the pelvic floor.

Now engage the pelvic floor by imagining that you are stopping the flow of urine midstream. To do this draw the muscles that are deep in the vagina upwards and inwards (for males imagine gently drawing the balls to the belly) while simultaneously constricting the muscles deep in the back passage (the rectum) - as if you are preventing yourself from breaking wind. You should hopefully feel the pelvic floor tighten and some very slight tension in the muscles right on the inside of the hip bones.

This is the most polite way I can describe pelvic floor activation. It’s often forgotten that the pelvic floor runs from front to back and actually does incorporate the rectum. **Once this activation of the pelvic floor is mastered, then recruit the transversus abdominus as well...**

Then (whilst holding the pelvic floor on), imagine the horizontal line of the ‘T’ on the surface of the stomach that connects the hip bones together. Focus on flattening that imaginary line and drawing it downwards towards the spine. You can also imagine the hip bones moving towards each other (without sucking in the stomach or lifting the rib cage upwards).

In addition you may like to think of drawing the navel to the spine, but the contraction is based below the navel, in between the hip bones. You should feel a small amount of tension in the muscles just inside the hip bones under your finger tips. This is the pelvic floor and transversus abdominus working together and activating.

If you keep the pressure on the fingers but release the stomach muscles quickly, you should feel the tension in the stomach under the finger tips release. Repeat the activation of these two muscles until you master it.

At this stage you are trying to keep all of the other stomach muscles relaxed, as we are just focused on isolation and activation. Once you have mastered this and strengthened these muscles by building up your endurance, you can simply progress to trying to hold the activation of these muscles whilst doing increasingly challenging exercises. This will really make the most of your core training. Often it’s just a matter of taking one step backwards to take ten steps forwards.

It’s important to note that when you begin to curl the upper body up off the floor in a sit up type motion and you start to use some of the other stomach muscles such as the rectus abdominus and obliques, the stomach will want to bulge outwards. You should always focus on flattening the imaginary line on the surface of the stomach towards the spine and preventing this bulging from occurring. Only ever curl up as high as you can maintain a totally flat stomach. Otherwise you’ll be defeating the purpose of your core training and you’ll be teaching your abs to stick outwards.

**NOW TAKE IT TO THE NEXT LEVEL**

Once you’ve mastered the recruitment of the TA and pelvic floor and you use them effectively in conjunction with the other abdominal muscles, the sky’s the limit with your core training.

Remember your new found T-Zone needs to carry over into everyday life, your gym and fitness training. It’s not enough to just focus on it when training the abdominals. Consciously think of keeping it tight for a whole month to create a habit and make it natural. Keep it tight even when sitting down or standing. Your stomach will appear flatter, your waist thinner and it will boost your confidence as well as increasing your core strength at the same time.

Once the T-Zone is fully mastered, add this quick mat based Pilates workout for abs sculpting, into your gym routine.
ABDOMINAL CURL – WARM UP AND ACTIVATE YOUR ABS

Lie on your back with your legs in tabletop, knees squeezed and the fingers interlocked behind the head to support the neck. Lower back imprinted to the floor, elbows wide and T-Zone tight. EXHALE as you slowly curl your ribs to your hips and lift your head and shoulders, curling your upper body up. Ensure your abdominals are flat and not popping outwards. If they are this is an indication that your T-Zone or TA is not working. INHALE and slowly relax back down. Repeat this 50 times, maintaining a flat stomach/T-Zone.

**Hot Tip:** Keep practicing this simple movement aiming for a totally flat stomach before moving onto harder exercises. When you can master this move whilst keeping the abs totally flat this is a sign that you’re T-Zone (or TA) is working in conjunction with the other abdominal muscles and getting you a flat stomach. If you don’t master this move you may not get the results.

**ABDOMINAL CURL**

1. **WARM UP AND ACTIVATE YOUR ABS**
2. **CRISS CROSS – TOTALLY RE-DEFINE YOUR WAISTLINE**
3. **HUNDREDS – BUILD ENDURANCE AND FLATTEN YOUR STOMACH**

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**CRISS CROSS – TOTALLY RE-DEFINE YOUR WAISTLINE**

Lie on the back, with your legs bent up in tabletop position, held hip distance apart with your hands behind your head and the elbows wide. T-Zone tight and flat. EXHALE and curl the ribs to the hips, lifting the head and shoulders and hold this curled up position. Rotate the upper body, drawing one ribcage toward the opposite hipbone and extend the other leg out straight. Return back to the centre maintaining the curl and swap to the other side. Continue to alternate sides. Repeat 50 times-25 each side.

**CRISS CROSS**

1. **TOTALLY RE-DEFINE YOUR WAISTLINE**

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**HUNDREDS – BUILD ENDURANCE AND FLATTEN YOUR STOMACH**

Lie on your back, with your knees bent and holding the knees. T-Zone tight. Exhale and curl your ribs to your hips by lifting your head and shoulders. Bring your hands down by your hips and simultaneously extend your legs straight up towards the ceiling. Ensure the T-Zone is flattening your abdominals. Hold this position for 10 breaths – breathe IN for the count of five and breathe OUT for the count of five to get to 100.

**HUNDREDS**

1. **BUILD ENDURANCE AND FLATTEN YOUR STOMACH**

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DOUBLE LEG LOWER – INCREASE THE CHALLENGE

Assume the same position as the previous exercise (Hundreds) by curling the ribs to the hips, eyes on the knees, the arms reaching past the body and the legs extended towards the ceiling. Hold this position and tighten the T-Zone. Keep the T-Zone flat as you EXHALE and lower the legs down towards the floor preventing the stomach from popping upwards and outwards. Prevent the back from arching up off the floor. INHALE and draw the legs back up to vertical. Repeat 20-30 times.

SIDE BRIDGE – SCULPT YOUR SIDES

Lie on your side with the top foot slightly in front of the underneath one and the legs straight. Come up either on the elbow or hand (if there is no pain in the wrist). T-Zone tight. Raise the hips up so there is one long line between the head, hips and feet and reach the top hand towards the sky. Feel this work the supporting arm and the underneath side of the waist. Hold this position for at 30 seconds to 1 min then swap sides.

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