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## Core Strengthening

### What is the “core”?

Although definitions of the “core” vary, the term is generally used to describe a set of muscles that stabilize joints. This stability allows for proper mechanics and movement. In the low back and pelvis, the core muscles include the deep abdominals (transverse abdominis), deep spinal muscles (multifidus), pelvic floor, and diaphragm. This is why people instinctively hold their breath for maximal effort!

### Strength vs. Function

The vast majority of us have strong core muscles. These structures are built to function throughout our waking hours. Many of us, however, do not properly activate them prior to movement and thus do not adequately stabilize our spinal/pelvic region. Core exercises are important but you **MUST** also practice activating these muscles during your everyday activities (eg. sitting, walking, standing, lifting).

### Exercises

1. **Belly/diaphragmatic breathing:** Lie in a comfortable position. Take a deep breath in and allow your belly to expand. Do not lift your collarbones or shoulders. Exhale and repeat 4 times.
2. **Transverse abdominis:** Lie on your back with knees bent. Find the bony bumps on the front of your hips (anterior superior iliac spine). Move your fingers about 1” down and in, where you feel a soft, relaxed muscle. Tighten that muscle by pulling your belly button toward your tailbone. Hold for 10 seconds and repeat 5 times. Remember to breathe! Keep everything else relaxed.
3. **Pelvic floor/kegel:** Lie in a comfortable position or sit in a chair. Squeeze around your openings and try to lift them toward your belly. Alternatively, you can imagine needing to stop your urine mid-stream. Hold for 2-3 seconds and repeat 10 times.
4. **Progression:** Use the above three exercises in everyday function! Prior to movement (eg. getting out of bed or a chair), activate your transverse abdominis and pelvic floor. Remember to breathe.
5. **Progression (quadruped):** Start on your hands and knees. Pull your belly button toward your tailbone and squeeze around your openings as in the exercises above. If you can, lift one arm in front of you (like Superman flying) and/or one leg behind you. Take care not to allow your trunk to rotate – your back should be flat with shoulders and hips square to the floor. Hold for 5 seconds, repeat 5 times. Remember to breathe! (This is a great exercise for the third trimester when lying on your back is difficult. It’s also a good way to develop core strength in a common labour/delivery position.)