

Essential Exercises

5 easy ways to get strong and avoid injuries

By Christie Aschwanden, Julie Cederborg, August 2003

A good set of lungs goes a long way in the backcountry, but aerobic training is only half the battle. Reebok Master Trainer Petra Kolber recommends a regular at-home maintenance program to keep key muscle groups tuned up. Do these five exercises two or three times a week.

Toe lift

Target: Shins

If you're planning a trip with plenty of descending, this exercise will help protect your shins from the pounding.

Sit in a chair with your knees bent at 90 degrees and your hands resting on your thighs. Place your right heel on top of your left foot. Lift the front of your left foot, bending at the ankle and keeping your heel on the floor, while pressing down with your right heel to add as much resistance as you need. Pause and return to the starting position. Repeat eight to 12 times, then switch legs. Build up to three sets.

Calf raise

Target: Calves

This exercise will strengthen your calves to avoid strains and add power for the steps.

Stand facing a wall, with your feet hip-distance apart, and gently rest both of your hands on the wall for support. Press up onto the balls of your feet. Pause and return to starting position. Repeat eight to 12 times. Build up to three sets.

Plank

Target: Core strength and shoulder stability

Your core keeps you upright on the trail and controls the weight of your pack. Working it will ward off fatigue and prevent injuries to other muscles you rely on when your core gets tired.

Lie on your stomach with your abdominal muscles pulled in tight. Prop yourself up on your elbows. Keeping your back straight, push up with your forearms and toes. Hold for three to five breaths and lower. Repeat eight to 12 times. Build up to three sets.

Wall squat

Target: Glutes and hamstrings

Develop strong glutes and hamstrings, and you'll be far less sore after a day of descending.

Stand with your back to a wall, arms down by your sides. Walk your feet out 6 to 8 inches in front of you and put your feet together. Slowly slide down the wall until your thighs are parallel to the floor. Pause, and then push up to the starting position. Repeat eight to 12 times. Build up to three sets.

Quadricep lift

Target: Quads

To power up hills, you need killer quads. Thank us after your next set of switchbacks.

Sit upright on the floor and extend your right leg out in front of you, placing a folded towel under your knee. Bend your left knee and keep your left foot flat on the ground. Place your hands palm-down on the floor behind you. Contract your right thigh and lift your right heel off the floor. Hold for three to five breaths and lower to the starting position. Repeat eight to 12 times and switch legs. Build up to three sets.

Tune Up: Strong To The Core

Haul hefty loads more easily by strengthening your midsection.

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Sergeant Ken Weichert could teach you a thing or two about carrying heavy loads. The master Army trainer humped 75 pounds of gear in 125°F heat in both Gulf Wars and credits ruggedized abdominal and back muscles for keeping him upright. That's why Weichert now emphasizes core training as part of his boot-camp-style fitness classes in the Bay Area. "It's all about posture," explains the 38-year-old hiker, who also leads backpacking trips (most popular: Operation Summit Whitney). "Your core muscles stabilize the spine, which lets you maintain proper posture. This prevents injury, improves balance, and keeps your pack weight on your hips instead of your shoulders." Plus, a solid core provides a base of strength for the entire body, enabling you to put more power into each step with less effort. Perform Weichert's workout 3 to 5 times a week. Start with 10 repetitions and gradually build to 50 for each exercise. Every 10th rep, hold for 10 seconds to check your form; proper form better targets the muscles you want to strengthen and prevents injury.

The Swimmer

Lie on your stomach, arms out to side and bent at the elbows. Squeeze your glutes and lift your legs a few inches off the ground. Lift your chest slightly while you look straight ahead. Hold this position as you move your arms about 6 inches back and forth. Keep your butt tight to prevent back injury and to keep core muscles engaged. Works: entire back, glutes, quads

Russian Twist With Medicine ball

Set a decline bench at a 45-degree angle. Sit at the top holding a 6-pound medicine ball (or 2/3 gallon jug of water) near your upper chest. Engage the abdominals and slowly drop halfway down until your torso is perpendicular to the bench. Twist to the right, back to center, then to left as if you were drawing a semi-circle with the ball. Repeat. As your strength increases, hold the ball six inches from your chest, then with fully extended arms (don't lock your elbows). Works: entire abdominal area

Push-Ups To Plank

Here's a simple twist on the old standby. Do as many push-ups as you can until muscle failure, then go immediately into a plank hold by resting on your forearms and hold for 30 seconds. Build to 45 second, then 60. Keep your glutes and abs clenched to ensure the core muscles are active. Works: chest, arms, back, abdominals, glutes, thighs