

Run For Your Life!

By Susan Lowe-Wylde
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If you are reading this article chances are you love running and plan to run for the rest of your life. If you are like most runners all you want to do is “hit the trails”! The problem is that if running is your only form of exercise there is a good chance that at some point you will get injured and might have to stop running. However, if you invest a small amount of time every week to improve your core strength and flexibility, then it is less likely that you will get injured and that will keep you running!

The muscles from the bottom of your ribcage to your mid thigh on the front, side, and back of your body make up your core. These are muscles that hold your spine, pelvis, and thighbone steady to prevent excessive torso movement while running. When your core muscles are strong you can run with good form, saving energy and putting less stress on your joints. When your core muscles have the right amount of flexibility you can run with a fluid and efficient running style. All of this equates to less injury and less pain. Now let's get started...

To improve core strength and stability:

- >> Activate your most important core stabilizing muscle: the Transverse Abdominis (TA). This is your deepest abdominal muscle and must be engaged during all strengthening exercises as well as while running. In fact, this muscle should be gently contracted as you move through your day.

- >> Here's how to contract your TA muscle:
Lie on your back with your knees bent. Find your 'hip points' (the highest point of each hip bone or pelvic rim). Move your fingers in toward your belly button one centimeter and down toward your pubic bone one centimeter. Imagine you are trying to pull your belly button away from the inside of your waistband. You should feel a gentle tightening under your fingers – this is your TA contracting.

- >> Strengthen the muscles that surround your hips, specifically your Gluteus Medius ('glute med'). This muscle connects your pelvis to your thighbone and is key to keeping your pelvis still while your legs are moving. This is an important action for injury-free running. Weakness in your glute med results in your pelvis dropping on that side which leads to poor alignment in your hip, knee and foot. This is one reason why runners often develop IT band syndrome, kneecap tracking problems, plantar fasciitis, and hip bursitis.

- >> Here are two ways to strengthen your glute med muscles:
Clam Shells:
 - Lie on your side with your knees bent to 90 degrees and your hips bent. Make sure your hips and shoulders are stacked.
 - Activate your TA muscle. Keep your heels together and open your knees like a clamshell, externally rotating your top hip. There should be no movement in your pelvis as you lift your leg.
 - Hold this position for 2 seconds and then slowly lower to starting position.
 - Start with 10-20 reps on each side and progress to 2 sets of 30 reps.

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Pelvic Drop/Hip Shrug:

- Start on the bottom step of your stairs. Stand sideways and hang one leg off the step.
- Level your pelvis and engage your TA muscle. Lower your free leg toward the floor by slowly letting your pelvis drop.
- Keep your supporting leg on the step straight; do not bend your knee.
- When your pelvis drops down as far as possible, hold this position for a second or two.
- Now return to the starting position by contacting the glute med muscle of your standing leg.
- It is important to note that you are working the standing leg and not the leg being lowered.
- Start with 10-20 reps on each side and progress to 2 sets of 30 reps.

These exercises are a great place to start. When you feel ready, add more exercises that will strengthen your core...planks, bridging, balance exercises... all great if you are connecting with your TA muscle and waking up your gluteus medius.

To improve flexibility and mobility:

- >> Stretch the muscles that surround your hip joints. This will help to loosen any tight muscles and fascia that restrict fluid movement in your hips. Long static holds of 30 seconds or more are the way to go.

Establish your own 10-15 minute routine of strengthening and stretching exercises. Here are two resources that you might like:

- Quick Strength for Runners, Faster Running Fewer Injuries 1 Hour a Week, Jeff Horowitz, Velopress, 2013.
- The Runner's Guide to Yoga, A Practical Approach to Building Strength and Flexibility for Better Running, Sage Roundtree, Velopress, 2012.

Consider seeing a physiotherapist or certified personal trainer to ensure you are exercising with correct form and addressing your specific muscle imbalances. Perform your routine 2-3 times a week on your non-running days or after your run. Never fatigue your key stabilizing muscles before a workout, as this will increase your chance of injury.

A strong, flexible runner is a fast, injury-free runner.... a happy runner too!



Susan Lowe-Wylde is a Kinesiologist and owner of **spry hard goods, fitness, yoga** in Crowsnest Pass, AB. As a young athlete, Susan competed internationally in the sport of orienteering. She continued to run for fitness and health until her injuries finally caught up to her in her mid 40's and she had to stop running. Thanks to strength training and yoga practice she is happily running again!