

## ‘I’m a 68-Year-Old Trainer, and this is My Go-To Core Exercise to Ease Back Pain and Improve Balance’



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One of the first things that personal trainer Lori Michiel, 68, does with her senior clients is help them to locate their core muscles.

“I have people do a lot of closed-eye exercises when it's safe,” Michiel says. She finds this helps them to get them in touch with their bodies, since not everybody has good kinesthetic awareness, or understanding of and control over how their body parts move.

To help clients engage their core, Michiel has them press their hand into their stomachs, and push against it by squeezing their muscles. Then, after releasing, she tells them to place their hand lightly on their shirts, and repeat that engagement motion, but without the pressure of the hand. When clients can feel their shirts loosen, she says that’s when they know they’ve found their core.

A senior trainer since 2006, today Michiel runs a network of more than 30 trainers who work with seniors in Southern California. She also stays active herself. A love of dance and movement has always inspired her, and music is a big part of her training routine for herself and her clients.

But recently she started focusing on core work specifically to help alleviate back pain, and says she's seen incredible results. Key to this success was giving up the idea of having a "flat stomach," which she says is something that comes from genetics, not exercise. Instead of working on those six-pack muscles through moves like sit-ups, she focuses on internal, lower, and side core muscles.

"We're not looking for six packs when we're older," Michiel says. "The lower abdominal muscles, the ones that are closer to your belly button, those are the ones that have a direct correlation to your lumbar spine."

In addition to combating back pain, Michiel says she implements this sort of core work for herself and her clients to improve balance and prevent falls.

"Balance is the most important thing," Michiel says. "Imagine somebody's walking with their dog and their dog is pulling them. If you have good core strength, you can upright yourself without having to trip or fall."

To build this body awareness and strengthen these muscles, Michiel likes to do standing ab exercises. They're simple, effective, and don't require getting onto the floor. Though she underscores that you can work your abs "just by thinking about them" and squeezing them, she says, a bit of resistance will help improve core strength.

## Here's how to do Lori Michiel's go-to standing core exercise for seniors

1. Stand upright, and hold a single dumbbell in your hands in front of your hips with straight arms. The weight should be light—the goal is to use it to engage your abs, not challenge your shoulders and arms.
2. With mostly straight arms (a slight bend in the elbows is okay), raise the dumbbell straight in front of you, to about chest height. Make sure not to go above the shoulders.
3. As you raise your arms, squeeze in your abs.
4. Lower your arms, and release your abs.
5. Repeat 10 to 20 times.

Add some rotation: For an additional challenge, instead of raising and lowering your dumbbell straight up and down, twist to one side as you raise, and back to center as you lower. This will help engage your obliques on the sides of your torso.

Play with tempo: Michiel also suggests mixing up the pace of your exercises. For example, try raising the dumbbell slowly (for three seconds), and then lowering it quickly back down, or vice versa.