

## Plank Goodness

*Exercise works abdominals, lower back, chest, shoulders, triceps, biceps, and legs*

**Missy Keenan, Special to the Register** *November 17, 2014*



Just for fun, Vic Morales and his kids started doing planks together on the living room floor to see who could hold it the longest. But it wasn't long before Morales, a long-distance runner, realized planking is a great core and upper body workout to supplement his running.

"I've been a runner for about 28 years now, and as I've gotten older, I've lost flexibility and some core strength," said Morales, 40, who sneaks in 2- to 3-minute planks between conference calls at work.

"Planks offer a new way to keep my midsection strong and it really does help with my running form, especially the latter part of the race

where you're struggling to stay strong. I would definitely say it also adds a mental confidence during races."

More than just about any other exercise you can think of, planks work your entire body. While planks focus primarily on the core muscles in your abdominals and low back, they also work your shoulders, chest, triceps, biceps, back, and legs.

"Because planks involve so many muscle groups, everyone should do planks as part of their overall exercise program," said Abe Kalka, manager of Aspen Athletic Club on Fleur Drive in Des Moines.

Planks are an especially great exercise for people who want to develop core strength and improve posture, especially if you sit for long hours or have low back pain.

"When doing a proper plank, you're activating muscles that shut down when sitting, such as your abdominals and low back," Kalka said. "Planks also stretch your hip flexors, which get shortened during prolonged periods of sitting."

Planks are challenging, so at first you may only be able to hold them for 5-10 seconds. Many people find that they can increase their plank time weekly or even daily if they do them often enough.

However, to avoid injury, Kalka said you should only increase your plank time if you can maintain perfect posture and form.

For a perfect plank form, "suck and tuck," Kalka said. By that he means to keep your entire body parallel to the floor including your head and neck, tighten your abdominals and low back, keep your bottom down, and keep your elbows tucked in. And don't forget to breathe!

### Three Planks to Try

Here are three planks you can try at home or at the gym. Choose the exercise that's right for your fitness level.



#### Basic Forearm Floor Plank

Everyone should have the basic plank in their exercise repertoire: Get into basic forearm plank position. Straight back, abs tight, butt down, elbows in, hands out, on your toes. (Modification: If this is too hard, you can start with your knees on the floor instead of your toes.) Hold the position as long as you can breathe normally and maintain perfect posture without pain. This may only be 5-20 seconds for beginners. Kalka recommends sticking with this variation until you can hold it for 60 seconds. Do three sets of 10 to 60 seconds each.



#### Plank Push-up

Try this plank variation for an added upper body workout: Start in the basic forearm plank position. As before, maintain a straight back, abs tight, butt down, elbows in, hands out, on your toes. Shift your weight to one side while pushing your body up from your forearm to your hand with the opposite arm, then shift your weight to that arm and complete the push-up with the other arm, resulting in a plank with both arms straight. Reverse the steps to return to the forearm plank position. Do five to 10 repetitions on each arm, three to four sets.



#### Plank with Adduction/Abduction

Try this plank variation for additional toning for your glutes and legs: Start in the basic forearm plank position. As before, maintain a straight back, abs tight, butt down, elbows in, hands out, on your toes. Raise one leg up about six to 12 inches from the ground. Scissor the raised leg out to the side, then bring it back and set it down. Repeat the process on the other side.

Alternating legs, do five to 15 reps on each leg, three to four sets.

### The Plank Challenge

If you've spent much time on social media lately — especially Pinterest — you've probably heard of the plank challenge. In the plank challenge you start at 20 seconds, and over the course of 30 days, work your way up to a 5-minute plank. (Google "plank challenge" if you want to try it out.)

A few months ago I decided to try the plank challenge, thinking a goal like this would be a fun way to shake up my workouts. It turns out that "fun" was probably the wrong word for it. I found that screaming and cursing were the only way I could get through a plank hold once I got much over 1 minute, so I tried to do my planks only when no small children were around.

As with all planks, it's important to maintain perfect posture, which is pretty tricky to do for 5 minutes. I found that 3½ minutes is about the maximum I can hold safely without my lower back starting to ache.

Kalka said the plank challenge can be a fun way to push yourself toward a goal and stay motivated. However, he also recommends diversifying your exercises and trying variations like the plank pushup and the plank with abduction/adduction so you don't get burnt out.