

— GENTLE 4-WEEK CORE ROUTINE

Best Core and Abs Workout for Back Pain

A gentle, evidence-informed routine for a strong, steady core. Easier and harder versions of every move, and clear signs for when to see a professional.

MOST DAYS: THE BIG 3



Curl-up
front of your core



Side plank
side of your core



Bird dog
back and hips

3 days a week, add:

Dead bug

Glute bridge

Palof press

Every day:

A walk

10–15 min

for the Big 3 most days, plus extras 3 days a week

4 weeks

step by step, with 3 levels per move

Mat + band

a resistance band from Week 2

— READ THIS FIRST

When to stop and see a doctor

Most back pain gets better with time and gentle activity. Some symptoms need a professional, though. Read this before you start, and come back to it if anything changes.



Get emergency care now (call 911 or go to an ER) if you have back pain with:

- New trouble controlling your bladder or bowels, or you can't pee
- Weakness, numbness or tingling in your legs that's severe or getting worse, especially in both legs
- Chest pain or trouble breathing
- Numbness in your groin, genitals, buttocks or inner thighs (the area a saddle would touch)
- Pain that started after a serious fall, car accident or other injury



See a doctor or physical therapist first if you have:

Already started? Pause the plan until you've been checked.

- Numbness, tingling or weakness in a leg or foot
- A fever or chills, or you feel generally unwell
- A history of cancer, osteoporosis, long-term steroid use or a weakened immune system
- Pain after a minor fall or bump, especially if you're over 50 or have weak bones
- Pain that isn't getting better after a few weeks
- Pain that spreads down your leg, below the knee
- Weight loss you can't explain
- Constant or severe pain, pain that's worse at night, or pain that doesn't ease when you rest or change position
- A recent back injury or surgery, or you're pregnant



Stop an exercise if it causes...

- sharp or stabbing pain
- pain that spreads into your buttock or leg
- new numbness or tingling
- pain that's clearly worse the next day

Skip it and try an easier level another day. If it keeps happening, get checked.



This is not medical advice

This guide is general information. It can't diagnose or treat any condition, and it isn't a substitute for care from your doctor or physical therapist. If you're not sure these exercises are right for you, ask one of them first.



Who this guide is for

Adults with everyday low back pain (aches and stiffness without any of the warning signs above), people whose doctor or physical therapist has said gentle core exercise is OK, and anyone who wants a stronger, steadier core.

START HERE

How to use this plan

Guidelines for low back pain recommend staying active and doing exercise you can tolerate. This routine trains the muscles around your spine to hold it steady. No sit-ups, no heavy twisting.



Why these exercises?

The curl-up, side plank and bird dog are often called the **McGill Big 3**, after spine researcher Stuart McGill, whose lab measured how hard core exercises work the muscles and how much they load the spine. These three challenge your core while your spine stays still. The other three add hip strength, control and resistance to twisting.

Sit-ups and toe touches aren't "bad," but repeated bending under effort bothers many sore backs, so this plan starts with moves that keep your spine still.



Your routine

MON B3 + extras	TUE B3	WED B3 + extras	THU B3	FRI B3 + extras	SAT B3	SUN rest
------------------------------	-----------	------------------------------	-----------	------------------------------	-----------	-------------

- **Most days (5–7 a week):** warm-up + the Big 3 (B3), about 10–15 minutes.
- **Mon, Wed, Fri:** add the three extras, about 8–12 more minutes.
- **Most days:** a walk, building from 10 to 30 minutes.



Short holds, in pyramids

The Big 3 use **8–10-second holds**, with a breath or two between reps. You build endurance by adding reps, not longer holds. **"2 sets: 5, 3"** means 5 holds, rest 20–30 seconds, then 3 holds.



How to brace

Keep your back in its natural curve, not arched or flattened. Gently tighten your stomach all the way around, as if someone were about to poke your belly. Don't suck in or push out. Use light effort and keep breathing.



Reps left in the tank

Stop every set while your form is still perfect, with **2–3 good reps (or holds) left in the tank**. In this routine you never push to failure. Each move has three levels; start at Level 1.



Listen to your back

pain on a 0–10 scale, during and after

0–2 OUT OF 10

Keep going

No pain, or mild discomfort that doesn't build. You're in the right zone.

3–4 OUT OF 10

Ease off

Some pain that settles within a day. Keep going, but use an easier level or fewer reps.

5+ OR SHARP

Stop that move

Sharp pain, pain spreading into your leg, or worse the next day. Go easier next time; see page 2 if it continues.



What you need

- A mat or carpet, and comfortable clothes
- From Week 2: a light resistance band, anchored at chest height (a door anchor or a sturdy post works)
- Comfortable shoes for your walks



Timing tip

Many backs feel stiffest right after waking up. Give yourself about an hour before this routine, and skip deep forward bends first thing in the morning. Any other time of day works.

THE PLAN

Weeks 1 and 2

WEEK
1

Calm and control
Learn to brace. Level 1 of each move, 3 left in the tank.
Walks: 10–15 minutes.

MON
B3
+ extras

TUE
B3
walk

WED
B3
+ extras

THU
B3
walk

FRI
B3
+ extras

SAT
B3
walk

SUN
rest
walk

B3 Big 3 + walk MOST DAYS				+ Extras MON · WED · FRI			
EXERCISE	SETS × REPS	REST	IN TANK	EXERCISE	SETS × REPS	REST	IN TANK
Cat-camel warm-up, gentle range	1 × 6–8 slow cycles	–	easy	Dead bug Level 1: heel taps	2 × 5 each side	30 s	3
Curl-up Level 1	2 sets: 4, 2 8–10-s holds	20–30 s	3	Glute bridge Level 1	2 × 8	30 s	3
Side plank Level 1: on knees	2 sets: 4, 2 each side	20–30 s	3	Pallof press starts in Week 2	–	–	–
Bird dog Level 1: one limb	2 sets: 4, 2 each side	20–30 s	3				
Walk comfortable pace	10–15 min	–	easy				

WEEK
2

Build endurance
One more hold per set; Level 2 if Level 1 felt easy and pain-free. The Pallof press starts.

MON
B3
+ extras

TUE
B3
walk

WED
B3
+ extras

THU
B3
walk

FRI
B3
+ extras

SAT
B3
walk

SUN
rest
walk

B3 Big 3 + walk MOST DAYS				+ Extras MON · WED · FRI			
EXERCISE	SETS × REPS	REST	IN TANK	EXERCISE	SETS × REPS	REST	IN TANK
Cat-camel warm-up, gentle range	1 × 6–8 slow cycles	–	easy	Dead bug Level 1 or 2	2 × 6 each side	30 s	2–3
Curl-up Level 1 or 2	2 sets: 5, 3 8–10-s holds	20–30 s	2–3	Glute bridge Level 1 or 2	2 × 10	30 s	2–3
Side plank Level 1 or 2	2 sets: 5, 3 each side	20–30 s	2–3	Pallof press Level 1, 2-s hold	2 × 8 each side	30 s	2–3
Bird dog Level 1 or 2	2 sets: 5, 3 each side	20–30 s	2–3				
Walk comfortable pace	15–20 min	–	easy				

Reading the tables. 2 sets: 4, 2 means 4 holds, rest, then 2 holds. 2 × 8 means 2 sets of 8 reps. Each side means finish one side, then do the other. In tank is how many good reps or holds you should have left when you stop. Sore day? Use a lower level or fewer reps. Doing a little beats doing nothing.

THE PLAN

Weeks 3 and 4

WEEK
3

Add a challenge

Level 2 for the Big 3 if it feels good, and a third set on the extras.

MON B3 + extras TUE B3 walk WED B3 + extras THU B3 walk FRI B3 + extras SAT B3 walk SUN rest walk

B3 Big 3 + walk

MOST DAYS

EXERCISE	SETS × REPS	REST	IN TANK
Cat-camel warm-up, gentle range	1 × 6–8 slow cycles	–	easy
Curl-up Level 2	2 sets: 6, 4 8–10-s holds	20–30 s	2–3
Side plank Level 2	2 sets: 6, 4 each side	20–30 s	2–3
Bird dog Level 2	2 sets: 6, 4 each side	20–30 s	2–3
Walk comfortable pace	20–25 min	–	easy

+ Extras

MON · WED · FRI

EXERCISE	SETS × REPS	REST	IN TANK
Dead bug Level 2	3 × 6 each side	30 s	2–3
Glute bridge Level 2	3 × 10	30 s	2–3
Pallof press Level 1 or 2	3 × 8 each side	30 s	2–3

WEEK
4

Make it yours

A third set on the Big 3. Level 3 only if Level 2 is easy and pain-free.

MON B3 + extras TUE B3 walk WED B3 + extras THU B3 walk FRI B3 + extras SAT B3 walk SUN rest walk

B3 Big 3 + walk

MOST DAYS

EXERCISE	SETS × REPS	REST	IN TANK
Cat-camel warm-up, gentle range	1 × 6–8 slow cycles	–	easy
Curl-up Level 2 or 3	3 sets: 6, 4, 2 8–10-s holds	20–30 s	2–3
Side plank Level 2 or 3	3 sets: 6, 4, 2 each side	20–30 s	2–3
Bird dog Level 2 or 3	3 sets: 6, 4, 2 each side	20–30 s	2–3
Walk comfortable pace	20–30 min	–	easy

+ Extras

MON · WED · FRI

EXERCISE	SETS × REPS	REST	IN TANK
Dead bug Level 2 or 3	3 × 8 each side	30 s	2–3
Glute bridge Level 2 or 3	3 × 12	30 s	2–3
Pallof press Level 2 or 3	3 × 10 each side	30 s	2–3



After Week 4

Keep the Big 3 as a daily habit; it takes about 15 minutes. When your back feels good, full-body strength training is a great next step. Build up slowly, and ask a physical therapist if you're unsure what's right for your back.

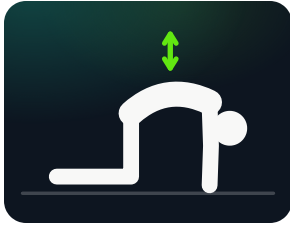


Flare-up?

Drop back to Level 1 and fewer reps, and keep walking in short bouts if you can. If nothing feels OK, take a day or two off the routine. Check page 2 if things don't settle.

EXERCISE GUIDE

The warm-up and the Big 3



Warm-up

Cat-camel

☑ Floor or mat

Gentle spine motion to loosen up. It's a motion, not a stretch.

- 1 On hands and knees: hands under shoulders, knees under hips.
- 2 Slowly round your back up toward the ceiling and let your head drop, then let your back sag gently as you lift your head.
- 3 Move only through a comfortable range. Don't push into the ends.

AVOID Forcing the end positions, or moving fast.

SORE DAY A smaller range, slower.

NORMAL 6–8 slow cycles, about 1 minute.



Big 3

Curl-up

☑ Floor or mat · front of your core

Not a crunch: your head and shoulders barely leave the floor.

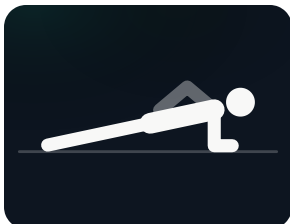
- 1 Lie on your back, one knee bent and one leg straight. Slide your hands, palms down, under the small of your back to keep its natural curve.
- 2 Brace, then lift your head and shoulders an inch or two, as if head and chest were one block. Don't tuck your chin or flatten your back.
- 3 Hold 8–10 seconds, breathing normally, then lower. Switch legs halfway.

AVOID Tucking your chin, pulling on your head, or curling up high like a sit-up.

LEVEL 1 Elbows stay on the floor.

LEVEL 2 Lift your elbows slightly off the floor too.

LEVEL 3 Take a deep breath in during each hold.



Big 3

Side plank

☑ Floor or mat · side of your core

Short holds, done well, beat one long, shaky hold.

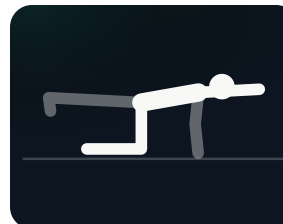
- 1 Lie on your side, elbow under your shoulder, top hand on your hip.
- 2 Brace and lift your hips until your body is in a straight line from head to knees (Level 1) or feet.
- 3 Hold 8–10 seconds without letting your hips sag or roll forward, then lower. Do all reps on one side, then switch.

AVOID Letting your hips sag, or rolling your chest toward the floor.

LEVEL 1 On your knees, knees bent behind you.

LEVEL 2 On your feet, top foot in front of the bottom one.

LEVEL 3 On your feet, feet stacked.



Big 3

Bird dog

☑ Floor or mat · back and hips

Your arm and leg move; your spine doesn't.

- 1 On hands and knees, back in its natural curve. Brace lightly.
- 2 Reach one arm forward and the opposite leg back until both are level with your body. Don't let your back arch or your hips tip.
- 3 Hold 8–10 seconds, then bring them back down slowly. Do all reps on one side, then switch.

AVOID Lifting your leg higher than your hip, which arches your lower back.

LEVEL 1 One limb at a time: slide a leg back along the floor, or reach one arm forward.

LEVEL 2 Opposite arm and leg together.

LEVEL 3 At full reach, trace small squares with your hand and foot.

EXERCISE GUIDE

The extras and your daily walk



Extra

Dead bug

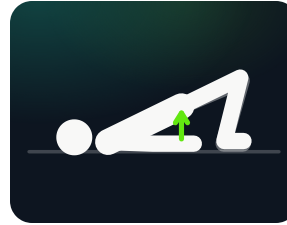
▢ Floor or mat · front of your core

Slow and controlled. Breathe out as you reach.

- 1 Lie on your back, arms pointing at the ceiling, knees bent at 90° above your hips.
- 2 Brace, then slowly lower one heel toward the floor (Level 1) or straighten that leg as the opposite arm reaches overhead (Level 2).
- 3 Keep your lower back steady, without arching. Come back, then switch sides.

AVOID Letting your lower back arch as the leg lowers. Shorten the reach instead.

-
- LEVEL 1** Heel taps: keep the knee bent and tap one heel down.
- LEVEL 2** Straighten the leg and reach the opposite arm overhead.
- LEVEL 3** Move slower, and pause 2 seconds at full reach.



Extra

Glute bridge

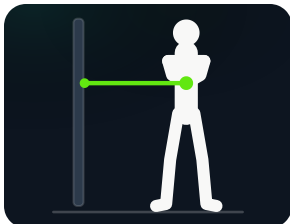
▢ Floor or mat · glutes and hips

Builds your glutes and the backs of your hips.

- 1 Lie on your back, knees bent, feet flat and hip-width apart.
- 2 Squeeze your glutes to lift your hips until knees, hips and shoulders line up. Your glutes do the work, not your lower back.
- 3 Hold 2 seconds at the top, then lower slowly.

AVOID Pushing your hips so high that your lower back arches.

-
- LEVEL 1** Lift only a few inches.
- LEVEL 2** Full bridge with a 2-second squeeze.
- LEVEL 3** Marching bridge: hold the top and lift one foot at a time.



Extra

Pallof press

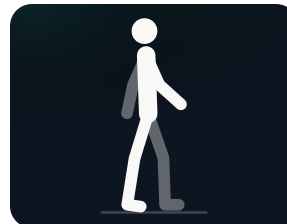
▢ Band or cable · resisting twists

Anchor the band to something sturdy, like a door anchor or a post.

- 1 Anchor a band at chest height. Stand side-on to it, feet hip-width apart, holding the band at the middle of your chest.
- 2 Brace and press your hands straight out in front of you. Don't let the band turn you toward the anchor.
- 3 Hold 2 seconds, bring your hands back to your chest, and repeat. Then face the other way.

AVOID Twisting toward the anchor, or shrugging your shoulders.

-
- LEVEL 1** Light band; stand close to the anchor.
- LEVEL 2** Step farther away for more tension.
- LEVEL 3** Hold 5 seconds, or stand in a split stance.



Daily

Walking

👤 Anywhere · your whole body

One of the simplest ways to stay active with a sore back.

- 1 Walk at a comfortable pace, standing tall and letting your arms swing naturally.
- 2 Start where you are. Two short walks count just as much as one long one.
- 3 If your back flares up, walk shorter and more often rather than stopping altogether.

AVOID Big jumps in time or distance. Add a few minutes at a time.

-
- LEVEL 1** 10 minutes, or two 5-minute walks.
- LEVEL 2** 20 minutes at a comfortable pace.
- LEVEL 3** 30 minutes, a little brisker.

TRACK IT

Your 4-week log

Tick off the Big 3 and the extras, write down your walk, and rate your back at the end of the day from 0 (no pain) to 10 (worst imaginable). Over a few weeks, the numbers show you what helps.

Week	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun	This week	
1	☐ Big 3 ☐ Extras walk ____ min back ____ /10	☐ Big 3 walk ____ min back ____ /10	☐ Big 3 ☐ Extras walk ____ min back ____ /10	☐ Big 3 walk ____ min back ____ /10	☐ Big 3 ☐ Extras walk ____ min back ____ /10	☐ Big 3 walk ____ min back ____ /10	☐ Big 3 walk ____ min back ____ /10	☐ Big 3 walk ____ min back ____ /10	Felt better: _____ Flared up: _____
2	☐ Big 3 ☐ Extras walk ____ min back ____ /10	☐ Big 3 walk ____ min back ____ /10	☐ Big 3 ☐ Extras walk ____ min back ____ /10	☐ Big 3 walk ____ min back ____ /10	☐ Big 3 ☐ Extras walk ____ min back ____ /10	☐ Big 3 walk ____ min back ____ /10	☐ Big 3 walk ____ min back ____ /10	☐ Big 3 walk ____ min back ____ /10	Felt better: _____ Flared up: _____
3	☐ Big 3 ☐ Extras walk ____ min back ____ /10	☐ Big 3 walk ____ min back ____ /10	☐ Big 3 ☐ Extras walk ____ min back ____ /10	☐ Big 3 walk ____ min back ____ /10	☐ Big 3 ☐ Extras walk ____ min back ____ /10	☐ Big 3 walk ____ min back ____ /10	☐ Big 3 walk ____ min back ____ /10	☐ Big 3 walk ____ min back ____ /10	Felt better: _____ Flared up: _____
4	☐ Big 3 ☐ Extras walk ____ min back ____ /10	☐ Big 3 walk ____ min back ____ /10	☐ Big 3 ☐ Extras walk ____ min back ____ /10	☐ Big 3 walk ____ min back ____ /10	☐ Big 3 ☐ Extras walk ____ min back ____ /10	☐ Big 3 walk ____ min back ____ /10	☐ Big 3 walk ____ min back ____ /10	☐ Big 3 walk ____ min back ____ /10	Felt better: _____ Flared up: _____



Your levels

write 1, 2 or 3

Exercise	Wk 1	Wk 2	Wk 3	Wk 4
Curl-up				
Side plank				
Bird dog				
Dead bug				
Glute bridge				
Pallof press				



Notes for your doctor or PT

 TRAIN SAFELY

Safety notes

This routine is gentle by design, but every back is different. Go by how yours responds, and get help when you need it.



Red flags: get emergency care (call 911 or go to an ER)

- new trouble controlling your bladder or bowels
- numbness in your groin, buttocks or inner thighs
- leg weakness or numbness that's severe or getting worse
- back pain after a serious fall or accident

Fever, unexplained weight loss, pain down your leg or other warning signs: see the full list on page 2.



Go by how your back responds

A little discomfort that settles within a day is usually OK. Pain that's sharp, spreads into your leg, or is worse the next morning means scale back: a lower level, fewer reps, or skip that move for now.



Breathe, and stay steady

Never hold your breath during a hold. Move slowly, keep your spine still in the Big 3, and stop each set while your form is still clean.



Check with your doctor first if...

you're pregnant or recently gave birth, had back surgery or a recent injury, or have been told you have osteoporosis or another spine condition.



When to get extra help

If your pain isn't improving after a few weeks, keeps coming back, or limits your daily life, see a physical therapist. They can examine your back and tailor exercises to you.



Everyday habits that help

- **Keep moving.** Bed rest usually slows recovery; gentle activity helps.
- **Break up long sitting.** Stand, walk or change position every 30–60 minutes.
- **Lift smart.** Keep loads close to your body, and turn with your feet instead of twisting.
- **Try heat.** A warm shower or heat wrap can ease stiffness.
- **Sleep and stress count.** Both can make pain feel worse.



Hurt doesn't always mean harm

With everyday back pain, a flare-up doesn't usually mean new damage. Doing too much too soon, poor sleep or stress can all set it off. That's why this plan builds up gradually and lets your back's response set the pace. The red flags above are the exception: take those seriously.

This guide is general information, not medical advice. It can't diagnose or treat any condition, and it isn't a substitute for care from your doctor or physical therapist. If you're not sure these exercises are right for you, ask one of them before you start.

Want a plan built around **your week?**

This routine is the same for everyone who downloads it. Kiwi is an AI personal trainer app for iPhone and Android that builds a plan for you.



A weekly plan built around you

Kiwi builds a weekly strength plan around your goal, the days you can train, how long your sessions are and your equipment, at the gym or at home.



Your numbers, ready next time

Log your sets in the app, and it keeps your numbers for next time.



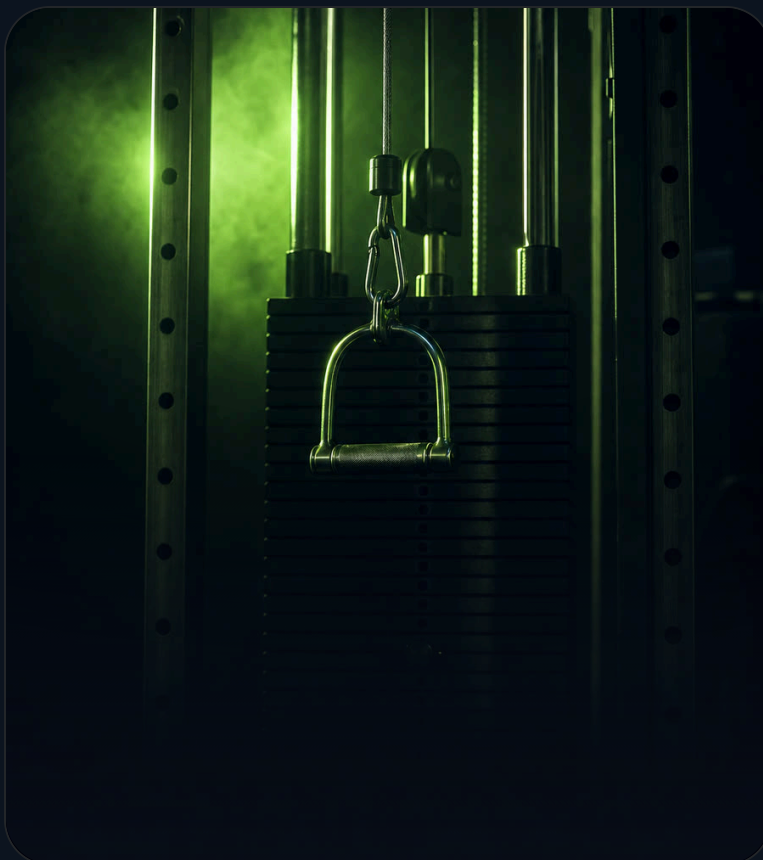
Ask your coach, any time

By text or voice: swap an exercise, change sets, reps or weights, shorten a session or move a workout, and your plan changes.



Video demos

Watch how the exercises are done.



Scan to get Kiwi

www.trainwithkiwi.com/get-the-app

Free to download, with a free week. For iPhone and Android.