

Week Six

Weak core at the heart of many lower back problems

Joe Ferry

Fernando Paredes knows what it is like to suffer with a bad back.

As a teenager, the owner of Fusion Fitness Studio in Doylestown and my personal trainer on this 10-week odyssey, hurt his back moving a piece of furniture. For weeks until the pain gradually subsided, he struggled just to get out of bed and has dealt with the after-effects most of his adult life.

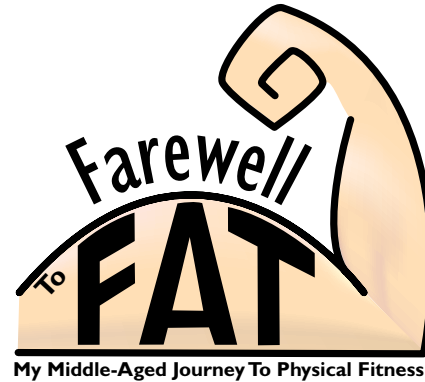
In January, ignoring his own advice, Fernando strained his back again while moving exercise equipment in his studio on Ferry Road in Doylestown.

"I always tell people, 'Just because you can do something doesn't mean you should.' I didn't listen to my own advice," he said with a laugh.

This time, however, Fernando remained functional while he gradually restored his back health through a series of exercises. That's because his research has led him to understand how the back muscles work in relation to the 30 muscles that make up the core, especially the obliques and the abdominals.

"I had a problem not because my back is weak," said Fernando. "It was a problem with the other 29 muscles. They were not strong enough, and they were causing the back muscle to do too much work."

Low back pain is one of the most significant health problems facing Americans today. Consider these statis-



tics from the National Institute of Health (NIH):

- Between 75 percent and 85 percent of all people have back pain at some time in their life.
- Back pain is the most frequent cause of activity limitation in people younger than 45 years old.
- 15 million American adults currently suffer lower back pain.
- In excess of 370,000 work-related back injuries occur annually.
- Each year, Americans lose 93 million days of work, at a cost of \$11 billion, due to low back injuries. They spend another \$5 million to \$24 billion in direct medical expenses.

So far in my workouts, pain back has been minimal. Fernando and his assistant Grace have been diligent about making me stretch before, during and after workouts to make sure my back

stays loose.

Strengthening the core to avoid back pain is a three-step process, says Fernando. First are stabilization exercises, second are rotation exercises and third is flexion exercises. Unfortunately, says Fernando, most people skip the first two steps and go right to the third: sit-ups and crunches.

"The problem with crunches is that you are only affecting about 20 percent of the area," he says. "The other 80 percent is where you will get the results you are looking for."

As the core becomes stronger, the results of exercise become maximized as the upper and lower body begin working together, says Fernando. Another pleasant byproduct of core strengthening is a smaller waistline as the core muscles become more toned, says Fernando.

Coming back from his January lower back issue was a gradual process, says Fernando. For the first month, he functioned at about 80 percent of capacity. For the next two months, he hovered around 90 percent. It has only been in the last few weeks that he's felt 100 percent and resumed all normal activities.

"Years ago, I would have been in a hospital," says Fernando. "But by working my core over the years, I basically 'stress-proofed' my back. That doesn't mean I won't have a problem, but it means I can recover much more quick-

ly."

With his own problems as motivation, Fernando has become something of an expert on the lower back. Check out his web site at www.fusionfitnessstudio.net. Click on CN8 Appearances for some informative videos about lower back health.

With Fernando and Grace leading the way, my workouts have increased in both intensity and duration. They keep adding new movements and decreasing the time between exercises to increase their efficiency.

My body is responding. Although the scale is staying steady, I definitely feel a difference.

This weekend was a great example of the progress I'm making. With the great weather, it was time to start with yard work.

Fernando and Grace warned me against trying to do too much. Moving mulch is not unlike shoveling snow, they said, and an injury would set me back weeks.

Anyway, I found myself digging out shrubs, cutting the front and back lawns, even washing the car without running out of gas.

To me, that's progress.

Do you have an inspirational fitness story to tell? Tips to share? I would love to hear from you. Drop me an email at jioeferry@buckscountyherald.com.