

The Plank – By Mitchell Leong



The plank is a well known abdominal exercise. We now do the plank as part of the fitness test at our Black Belt gradings instead of the traditional sit ups. My essay will talk about why doing the plank is much better than doing sit ups for gradings and will also discuss how to perform the various types of planks properly.

The sit up has been around for a number of years and tested at many black belt gradings. Recently you would have noticed a shift away from the traditional sit up exercise that has dominated the fitness industry for the last 15 years. The plank is one of the best exercises to build core muscles. Core muscles actually consist of many different muscles that stabilise the spine and pelvis to create a solid base or support. By having a strong core, it will help your performance in sports and other various exercises.

Back in the early days when scientists first learnt about the body by examining corpses, they determined that the main purpose of our core muscles was to flex the spine. Flexing the spine is exactly what we do when we do a sit up or any other type of movement that rounds or curves your lower back. As a result sit ups and crunches etc were said to be the most effective way to strengthen our abdominal muscles.

However, the flexing of the spine involved when doing sit ups and crunches can lead to poor posture because of the amount of stress placed on the spine itself, and too much flexing can lead to back/disc problems over time. Another key reason why some people have sore backs is because they lack abdominal strength.

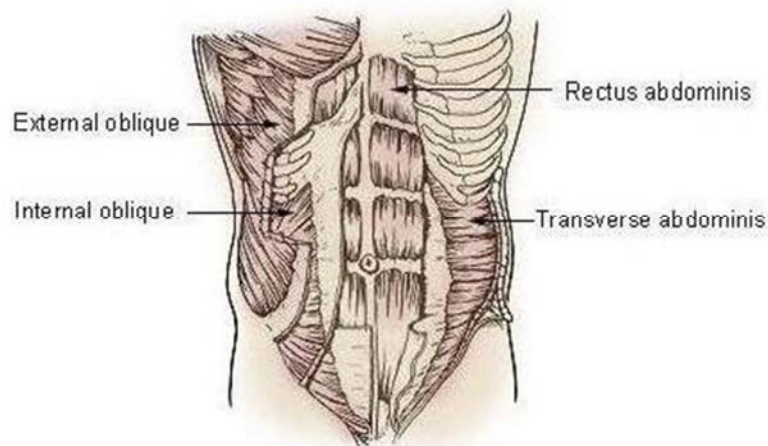
The back and spine are a vital part of our body which we use for ordinary activities like sitting, sleeping, walking or bending. The core muscles play a far more critical role than flexing our spine. The main job for our core muscles is to stabilise the spine, to keep it straight. The abdominal muscles are also the spine's primary defence against the forces of gravity. If we didn't have abdominal muscles we would simply be unstable and would not be able to walk around because gravity would push us down.

Our abdominal muscles are actually designed to do the opposite of what you do when you perform sit ups or crunches, that is to prevent flexing of the spine. People who regularly do stretching exercises during their warm up and warm down to help lengthen their muscles and to make the muscles more flexible are better able to perform correct abdominal exercises. This will help them develop a nice strong core keeping their spine aligned and straight and they will feel more flexible and will hardly ever experience back pain.

So what the sports scientists have now established, is that if you want better results from your abdominal workouts, then you should focus on stability through using different versions of the plank rather than doing traditional sit ups and crunches. The plank and its many variations makes you stabilise yourself in a position which develops and strengthens your abdominal muscles and this will lead to a reduction in back pain.

Like the sit up, you do not need any equipment to do the plank and it only takes a few minutes to perform each day. It is a simple, efficient and valuable exercise.

So the key reasons why we now do the plank in our Black Belt grading fitness section, is that it helps develop strength in the core muscles, shoulders, arms, and glutes and other various muscles. By forcing our bodies to stabilise itself into one position, the plank works these muscles. An advantage of planks in terms of developing better looking abs is that they work the transverse abdominus, while sit ups and crunches focus solely on the rectus abdominus also better known as the “six pack”.



The plank is an effective exercise that you can do to stabilise the entire core region and strengthen the obliques, abdominals, back and arms. The plank also works other muscles in the torso and legs but it is important that you learn to do it and its variations properly, both to keep your lower back safe and to get the most out of the exercise. For some tips on how to get it right and for some advanced options to try out, read more about the different plank variations below.

Different variations of the plank are:

- the front plank which is the most common one performed,
- the side plank,
- the hand and toe plank,
- stability ball planks which are hand/feet on a Swiss stability ball and feet/hands on the Swiss stability ball,
- weighted planks,
- the one leg plank,
- the reverse plank
- the human flag.



Front Plank:

To do the front the plank you need to balance on your elbows and toes while keeping your body in a straight line which means not having an arch in your back and not having your bum sticking up. Distribute your weight evenly between your elbows and toes. Keep your abdominals held in tight to support the lower back. To do this pull in your belly button towards your spine. If your back tends to arch, lift your hips slightly higher in the air which should take pressure off the lower back but do not allow your hips to sag which would cause hyperextension in the back. Hold your body in a straight line from the shoulders down to the toes. The front plank targets your abdominals, back, shoulders and your arms.



Side Plank:

To do the side plank you lie on your side with the right forearm on the ground. With your right arm straight and your left arm pointing towards the roof/sky and vice versa, keeping your hips high, lift yourself up so that you are balancing on the side of your foot either stacking one leg on top of the other or placing the top leg foot slightly forward of the other leg for better balance and on one hand. The side plank targets the abdominals, back, hip muscles and obliques.



Hand and Toe Plank:

To do a hand and toe plank evenly distribute your weight between your hands and your toes, in what is commonly known as the end or starting position of a push up. Keep your head in alignment with the spine and keep a straight line from your heels through to your shoulders and then through to your head. Extend out and upward from the shoulders so the entire core is engaged without sagging into the shoulder joints. Hand and toe plank targets your arms, shoulders and abdominals.

Stability Ball Planks:

To do a stability ball plank you need a Swiss stability ball. You can either place your arms on the stability ball with your toes on the ground or place your feet on the stability ball with your hands on the ground. The instability of the ball will make the exercise more intense and will require you to recruit more muscles to stabilise yourself. Also the farther away the ball is from your core, the more challenging the exercise becomes. Therefore the stability ball plank will target your whole abominable area.

***Hands/Feet on Ball:***

This type of plank is excellent for the smaller stabiliser muscles in the abdominals, obliques and lower back as your legs are resting on top of the wobbly, unstable surface of the stability ball. To do hands/feet on ball plank, get into a position where your toes are on the ball. Keep your pelvis tucked, abdominals tight and your hips slightly elevated to protect the lower back. The hands/feet on ball plank targets your abdominals, triceps, chest, shoulders and arms because your feet are elevated off the ground.



Feet/Hands on Ball:

This type of plank is excellent for the smaller stabiliser muscles in the abdominals, obliques and lower back. To do feet/hands on ball plank, begin by placing your hands in a position on the Swiss stability ball where you will be able to hold yourself up while you remain on your knees. Take a deep breath, contract your abdominals firmly and come up onto your toes, with your hands gripping or hold on the stability ball. The feet/hands on ball is a much more difficult stability ball plank than the hands/feet on ball plank. It targets your triceps, arms, shoulder and abdominals.



Weighted Plank:

To do the weighted plank you go into the front plank position and just put weights onto your back causing you to hold more weight therefore making the plank more intense and harder for your abs. This should only be done if you find the front plank too easy or if you feel that you want to make it harder by adding more weight onto you. The weighted plank targets what the front plank targets which are your abs, back, shoulders and arms but making it more intense.



One Leg Planks:

To do the one leg plank you start off in the front plank position and then all you do is brace yourself by making sure your abdominals are tight and then raise one leg for a certain amount of time and then change to the to the other leg. This plank focuses on balance which will cause you to use more muscles to keep you stable. The one leg plank targets the same areas as the front plank which are your abs, back, shoulders and your arms.

**Reverse Plank:**

This is the only type of plank variation in this essay that has you facing upwards. To do a reverse plank start from a seated position with the legs full extended in front of you. Have your hands slightly behind you, outside your hips. With straight arms, slowly lift your hips until your body is in a straight line from heels to shoulders, with your head and body in alignment. If you do experience any shoulder discomfort, stop the exercise. To add difficulty to this reverse plank, bend one leg slightly and lift the other leg up, giving the hamstrings, lower back and glutes an added challenge. The reverse plank/difficult reverse plank targets your abdominals, lower back, shoulders, glutes and hamstrings.



Human Flag:

To do the human flag you will need to use a pole e.g. lamp posts. The human flag requires you to have a tremendous amount of strength in your core, back, arms and upper body strength. The human flag involves holding a vertical pole and fully extending your body parallel to the ground. And to do it properly, your arms should be fully extended but there are other variations in doing the human flag. The easier way is when you have the higher arm on the pole bent and keep the bottom arm straight. This is exactly the same as the harder/proper human flag except you take off a bit of the exercise by having a bent arm.

In conclusion, the reasons why we do the plank now for our fitness test is firstly, it doesn't put excessive strain on your back like what sit ups can do. Performing the plank doesn't make our back flex and curve as happens when doing a sit up. Secondly it's a more difficult abdominal exercise which shows whether we have good, strong abdominal muscles. And lastly the plank and its variations can be done by anyone. Small, large, older or young, people can perform a plank which will help them develop a stronger core region. When doing sit ups older people, adults or even young people may find it hard to do because of the lack of abdominal strength or from previous back injuries. But a plank can be performed if you have these problems.

Just remember, start off slow and at your own pace. You only need to do the plank for 20-30 seconds, 5 to 10 times a day. Then every time you start to develop your abdominal muscles, push it up to 45 -60 seconds 5 to 10 times a day and so on.

So why not give it a go, try it on your own or with a friend. I'm sure you will feel great after doing it and you won't believe the results you will get from it!

This is why the plank is the ultimate abdominal core exercise there is.

