

Newsletter

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Stuart McGill's Big Three Back Exercises

by Henry Halse Jan. 30, 2018

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Dr. Stuart McGill is a spine researcher and author of several books, including "Low Back Disorders" and "Ultimate Back Fitness and Performance." He works at the University of Waterloo in Canada as a professor and researcher. He's made many contributions to our understanding of how the spine works and how to prevent spine injuries. He also works with clients, including professional athletes.

The [three exercises](#) that Stuart McGill uses to help people stabilize their spines are: the curl-up, the bird-dog, and the side-bridge.

The Big Three Exercises

Dr. McGill's approach to back rehabilitation and injury prevention includes what Dr. McGill calls the "big three exercises." They are meant to increase endurance of the muscles around your spine. The exercises are low-intensity, which means that they are very safe. The point of the big three is not to get stronger, but to build endurance and control of your spine.

The Curl-Up

This exercise trains the abs without moving your lumbar (lower) spine or cervical (upper) spine.

**Step 1**

Lie down on your back with your legs out straight. Bend your right leg and plant that foot on the floor next to your left knee.

Step 2

Put your hands under your lower back. They will prop your lower back up, which allows you to keep a natural curve in your spine.

Step 3

Curl your head, neck, and shoulders off of the ground. Try to keep your neck as still as possible while you lift your head up. Don't tuck your chin or let your head fall back.

Step 4

Try to hold yourself up at the top for 7 to 8 seconds.

Step 5

Lower yourself down. Do half of the repetitions with your right leg bent and half with your left leg bent.

The Bird-Dog

This exercise involves the core muscles, back muscles and even the glutes.

Read More: [McKenzie Exercises for Back Pain](#)

**Step 1**

Get on the floor on your hands and knees in a quadrupedal position. Make sure that your back is relatively flat.

Step 2

Raise your left arm forwards and at the same time extend your right leg straight back.

Step 3

Raise your arm and leg until they are in line with your torso. To increase activation of your back muscles even more during this exercise, you can clench the fist of the arm you're raising.

Step 4

Lower your arm and leg. Once you complete the desired amount of repetitions on that side, switch to the other side and repeat.

The Side-Bridge

This core endurance exercise strengthens the muscles on the side of your torso.

**Step 1**

Lie on your side, with your elbow underneath your shoulder. Curl your feet back so that your knees are at a 90-degree angle. To make this exercise harder, straighten out your legs instead of bending them.

Step 2

Lift your hips off of the ground, putting your weight on your elbow and knees.

Step 3

Hold that position for as long as you can. Try to maintain a straight line from your head down to your feet. Make sure that your hips are in line with the rest of your body.

Step 4

When you can no longer hold that position, drop and switch to the other side, once again holding for as long as you can.