

Back Yourself Up

By Jules, Boston Mamas Guest Contributor

We all know how vital it is to exercise regularly, but many of us don't realize how important it is to work each and every one of our muscles. Many women neglect working the back muscles because, aesthetically, most of us are more concerned with our thighs or abs. But, the muscles in our backs are overworked and overused, even though we don't often know it. A strong back will reduce back pain, protect you from some potential back injuries, and improve posture (a quick way to look like you lost a few pounds!). In addition, a strong back helps us with the undeniable activities of daily living: picking up the kids, carrying groceries, and overall flexibility and strength. While it can be challenging to tone what you can't see when you look in the mirror, it is worth your health (and that sexy strapless dress) to take the time on your back that you take on your front. Be sure to consult your physician before beginning any work out program. Try these to exercises at home to begin (you can buy a stability ball at fitness stores and at many chain stores like Kmart or Target):

- Lie on your stomach with your arms and legs outstretched. Pull your abdominals in towards your spine, as if you are trying to create a space between your belly button and the floor. Place your forehead gently on the floor and be sure that your neck is straight and aligned with your back.
- Lift your right arm and left leg a few inches off the floor and stretch them to opposite ends of the room. Hold for five slow counts, then slowly lower. Alternate and lift your left arm and right leg in the air, pretending that there is a string pulling at your fingertips and toes, stretching them out as far as you can. This is one set. Repeat and complete 12-15 sets. This targets your **entire back**.
- Start off in the same position as the above exercise. Arms should be above your head, resting on the floor.
- Lift arms a few inches off the ground and pull them towards you, and, bending at the elbow, lowering them so that your hands are now aligned with your face and your elbow and upper arms are at right angles (if you were sitting up straight, this would look like you are pulling down from above your head). Squeeze your back, almost in an attempt to squeeze something between your shoulder blades. Hold for one second and slowly return to your starting position. Repeat 12-15 times. This targets your **upper back**.
- Position your stability ball and lie on it, facing the floor. Balance by using your toes to stabilize yourself. The ball should be positioned between your tummy and your hips. Clasp your hands behind your head and in a smooth motion with your neck and back aligned, lift your chest off the ball until your body is in a straight line, stopping before your back begins to arch. Hold this position for one second and return to starting position slowly. Repeat 12-15 times. This targets your **lower back**.

These exercises should be performed up to three, non-consecutive days a week.