

Hard CORE Training: Building A Deep “Pillar of Strength” in 6 Weeks!

(Ron Jones, MS, ACSM Health/Fitness Instructor, Corporate Wellcoach)



Overview: After years of core training with hundreds of students, clients, and myself, I have organized a successful progression for core training of the trunk muscles surrounding the spinal column. These progressions are based on what “most” (not all) people have been able to do. I have generalized—but also included specific modifications and adjustments to fit many levels and abilities. While “core” is defined as the midsection, there are different “layers” of core muscles. To simplify, think of core muscles as either superficial (like the six-pack muscles you can see) or deep (the muscles right next to the spinal column that you can’t see). For injury prevention purposes, as well as optimal movement, *the most important core muscles are the “deep” muscles you cannot see.* This training method is what I call training people from the “inside out.” Training these deeper core muscles require different types of exercises called “Bridges” (also called “Planks”). Know this--It does not matter what you can bicep curl if your spine is weak! Train right—from the “inside out” by building the “Pillar of Strength” in your deep core.

Safety: After *Dynamic Warm-Up* (Level I) or *Movement Prep* (Level II), perform core exercises. Pay attention to the progressions and modifications listed. *Pick a safe level;* never be unsafe or exceed your capacity to “control” your body and position! Note that “Core” is the trunk area from waist to chest, front, sides, and back—all the way around both superficial and deep. See my other Core Handouts for more background details and website for actual photos and directions.

DEFINITIONS

Bridging Difficulty Levels—Separate Vs. Dynamic: To begin, do one bridge exercise at a time separately. As you increase deep core and shoulder strength, you can then combine the bridges “dynamically” as you “roll” from one to the next bridge position.

- **Limiting Factors:** The weaker the core, the less you can hold each bridge position. The weakest will not be able to hold at all and will have to go up and down/in and out of position i.e. “pulsing.” Bridging also requires shoulder stability. If your shoulders are unstable and weak, they will not allow you to bridge properly. Specific shoulder stability exercises might be needed before returning to the bridge program.

Exercise Position: This is the specific type of *Bridge* you’ll maintain (also called “Planks”). There are 4 basic bridges: Face Up, Face Down, Right Side, & Left Side. In a bridge/plank position, you will maintain a straight line with your *spine in neutral* at all times.

Base Support Position: Base Support refers to the floor anchor position of your lower body, which can be knees, toes, or split foot where you’re on the sides of both feet.

Position Duration: Duration is simply time. The shortest amount of time for an individual bridge is a “pulse.” When you pulse, you just come into position briefly then go right back down to floor and repeat. People that are too weak to maintain an extended bridge will have to pulse until they get strong enough to hold the “up” position. The eventual goal with all positions is to maintain a “quality” bridge with a *straight “neutral” spine* for a full 30 seconds. 30+ seconds per bridge is not recommended based on my experience because people lose control of quality.

Sets/Minutes Per Session: With separate bridges, the goal is 1-2 sets per session. When you advance to “Dynamic Bridges,” you go by total minutes per session. For both levels, you’ll get into the next bridge position and begin as soon as you are able with no (or minimal) resting—this will increase the strength *and endurance* of your deep core.

Sets Per Session: (Separate Bridges Only) You’ll do 1-2 sets of “each” bridge position. Go all the way through all four bridge positions once (Face Up>Face Down>R-Side>L-Side) before you start again. Going all the way through once with each of the bridges is called a “series.”

Sessions Per Week: To maintain this schedule of progressions, you must perform 2-3 sessions per one-week period. 1 session per week will help but not enable you to progress in a time-efficient manner. You need “at least” 1 day in-between sessions for proper rest. Depending upon fitness level, you might even need more than 1 day of rest—listen to your body and **DO NOT force your spine into progressions it is not able to perform safely with good form!**

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WEEK #1: “Separate Bridges”				
EXERCISE POSITION	BASE POSITION	POSITION DURATION	SETS PER SESSION	SESSIONS PER WEEK
1. Face Up	Flat Feet*	Pulse-30 Seconds	1-2	2-3
2. Face Down	Knees	Pulse-30 Seconds	1-2	2-3
3-4. Sides (Both)	Knees	Pulse-30 Seconds	1-2	2-3
SERIES DURATION: Work up to 2 sets @ 30 seconds per bridge for a total of 4 minutes.				
NOTES: If you can't maintain 2 back-to-back sets of full 30-second bridges by the end of the first week, repeat the above workouts until you can then progress to Week #2 on your modified schedule. <i>It will take you longer, but stick with it and you'll keep making progress.</i> *About 75% of the people I've trained can move right to a Face Up Bridge +1-Leg Alternating Extension the 1 st session. If the Flat Feet version is “obviously” too easy, try the leg extensions. If you can extend one leg <i>without dropping your hips</i> at all then the leg extensions are appropriate.				

WEEK #2: “Separate Bridges”				
EXERCISE POSITION	BASE POSITION	POSITION DURATION	SETS PER SESSION	SESSIONS PER WEEK
1. Face Up	1 Foot (1-Leg Extension)	Up to 30 Seconds	2	2-3
2. Face Down	Toes	Up to 30 Seconds	2	2-3
3-4. Sides (Both)	Split Foot	Up to 30 Seconds	2	2-3
SERIES DURATION: Work up to 2 sets @ 30 seconds per bridge for a total of 4 minutes.				
NOTES: If you can't maintain two back-to-back sets of full 30-second bridges on *toes and *sides of feet, repeat the above workouts until you can then progress to Week #3 on your modified schedule. *DO NOT move to Week #3 “Dynamic Bridging” until you can do full toe bridges (face down) and full side bridges (sides of feet placed in split foot position).				

WEEK #3: “Combined Dynamic Bridges”				
EXERCISE POSITION	BASE POSITION	POSITION DURATION	MINUTES PER SESSION	SESSIONS PER WEEK
Dynamic Bridge (Combines Face Down + Both Sides) ➤ Discontinue Face Up Bridge.	Toes (Face Down) & Split Foot (Sides)	15-30 Seconds	<u>Session #1</u> =2:00 minutes <u>Session #2</u> =2:30 minutes	2*
SERIES DURATION: Perform “up to” 30 seconds per bridge for a total of 2:00-2:30 minutes rolling “dynamically” from one bridge into the next with NO rest between bridges.				
NOTES: Do NOT perform Dynamic Bridging if you cannot master Week #2! Work up to full 30-second bridges before progressing to Week #4. If you cannot do 30 second bridges, stay here until you can. If able, add 30 seconds to each following Dynamic Bridge session. *Those doing very well might be safe with a 3 rd bridge session this week putting them ahead of schedule.				

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WEEK #4: “Combined Dynamic Bridges”				
EXERCISE POSITION	BASE POSITION	POSITION DURATION	MINUTES PER SESSION	SESSIONS PER WEEK
Dynamic Bridge (Combines Face Down + Both Sides)	Toes (Face Down) & Split Foot (Sides)	20-30 Seconds	<u>Session#1</u> =3:00 minutes <u>Session #2</u> =3:30 minutes	2*
SERIES DURATION: Perform “up to” 30 seconds per bridge for a total of 3:00-3:30 minutes rolling “dynamically” from one bridge into the next with NO rest between bridges.				
NOTES: Add 30 seconds to each Dynamic Bridge session. *Those doing very well might be safe with a 3 rd bridge session this week putting them ahead of schedule.				

WEEK #5 “Combined Dynamic Bridges”				
EXERCISE POSITION	BASE POSITION	POSITION DURATION	MINUTES PER SESSION	SESSIONS PER WEEK
Dynamic Bridge (Combines Face Down + Both Sides)	Toes (Face Down) & Split Foot (Sides)	25-30 Seconds	<u>Session#1</u> =4:00 minutes <u>Session #2</u> =4:30 minutes	2
SERIES DURATION: Perform 30 seconds per bridge for a total of 4:00-4:30 minutes rolling “dynamically” from one bridge into the next with NO rest between bridges.				
NOTES: Some might be at 5:00 by this point and ahead of schedule. If not, it’s a good idea to <i>perform only 2 sets this week</i> since the duration is now at least 4:00 minutes.				

WEEK #6: “Combined Dynamic Bridges”				
EXERCISE POSITION	BASE POSITION	POSITION DURATION	MINUTES PER SESSION	SESSIONS PER WEEK
Dynamic Bridge (Combines Face Down + Both Sides)	Toes (Face Down) & Split Foot (Sides)	30 Seconds	5:00 minutes! ☺	1 only!
SERIES DURATION: Add final 30 seconds for total of 5:00.				
NOTES: Congratulations! <i>You can now hold a bridge without shaking like a Chihuahua!</i> You have a “Hard CORE Pillar of Strength” powering your body!				
To maintain deep spinal strength, perform 1 session of Dynamic Bridging per week for <i>at least 5:00 minutes</i> . Those involved in competitive athletics or other demanding activities might consider continuing the progression design of adding 30 seconds to each bridge session for additional spinal stability as needed.				

*Ron Jones (10-21-05)