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## Forever Young

### How working the pelvic center restores youthfulness

Jaime Stover Schmitt

When you think of youth, what comes to mind? Limitless possibility? Boundless energy? That innocent blend of driving curiosity and the developing capacity to satisfy it? A youthful body is characterized by the vital energy of a child bursting forth from school, the grace and agility of a running back, and the total body flexibility of a pre-teen gymnast. As young children, our supple bodies were in constant motion, strengthened by use, inspired by our innate need to know. Our civilized adult lives require us to move in a less dynamic range, and so our bodies gradually lose their ability to move fully.

Unless we counter this by setting aside time for physical play and variety in our movement life, we lose touch with our agility, stiffen up, and grow weak in areas not frequently used. As our vitality dwindles, we feel, well . . . old, particularly when we lose flexibility in the pelvic area. Lack of mobility here is an unmistakable mark of aging, a stiffened gait, an inability to stoop or squat with ease, an embarrassing struggle to come to standing. The pelvic center, the area from our waist to the pelvic floor, is the body's center of mass and weight. When we move anywhere, the pelvic center is predominantly the thing we are moving. It is the body's grand central station. Large and small movements originate from, travel through, or return to this center. When it is flexible and strong, motor impulses, like trains, travel freely without a glitch, integrating our movement.

Graceful, well-coordinated movements then travel evenly throughout the body, calling upon the right measure of flexibility and strength from each body part. And when movement is integrated in this way our body weight can be mobilized to accomplish even the most astounding feats of physical prowess, balance, and skill. Picture Tiger Woods' golf swing, or Michael Jordan closing in on two points. Integrated movement yields agility, an ability to swiftly and adeptly shift the body's weight. Joseph Pilates, the originator of a popular exercise method based in part on hatha yoga, taught that strength of the pelvic center was the sole secret to retaining youth. Until his accidental death in his later years, Pilates, himself the picture of health, demonstrated that by keeping his power center strong he not only retained the agility and energy of youth, but was also able to resist all forms of illness.

In the West we barely have a chance to exercise and mobilize our body in daily life. The result? A cycle of lessening ability. We do less, lose mobility, so we do even less, lose more mobility. Sometimes our feeling of youthfulness seems to slip away as a result of a cycle of injury that gradually debilitates our physical body piecemeal. If our pelvic center becomes stiff, weak, or both, our movement impulses cannot move through the pelvic station. And if the force of a movement cannot travel effectively through the pelvis to its destination, it gets diverted elsewhere. This kind of misdirected force is an invitation to injury. Most of us are a mixture of imbalanced strength and weakness. Muscles that are chronically contracted can pull bones out of their proper alignment, and chronic strain due to faulty alignment is a leading cause of injury to the hip and knee joints as well as to the spinal discs, placing them in serious jeopardy of further deterioration and dysfunction.

Faulty alignment in any area of the body radiates its imbalance throughout the entire skeletal structure. Muscles that are weak fail to support bones properly. Sedentary living commonly gives us a weak abdominal wall and tightness throughout the pelvis. On the other hand, healthy abdominal tone, together with pelvic flexibility, helps keep the bones of the spine, pelvis, and legs in proper alignment, permitting movement impulses to travel through the body's center with ease. The resulting strength and flexibility produces freedom in movement, which is tantamount to preventing injury as we age. The practices which follow offer an antidote to the forces which inhibit our freedom to move and deaden our vitality. Fit them into your day regularly, and you will reclaim your youthfulness by increasing vital energy and restoring strength and flexibility to the pelvic center.

#### Locating Your Abdominal Muscles

A host of muscles work together synergistically throughout the pelvic center. But because of our erect human stance, the muscles in the abdominal wall require focused cultivation. Their strength and flexibility must be balanced with that of the muscles deep in the pelvis. The transverse abdominal muscles are the deepest of the girdle-like muscles in the abdominal wall. Except for a central

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section of connective tissue, these muscles run around your abdomen horizontally like a stack of tires. (Visualize the Michelin Tire man.)

To isolate the action of these muscles, relax on your spine with the knees bent and the soles of the feet on the floor. Imagine that your abdominal region is the front of a lace-up shoe. As you exhale, tighten the laces of the shoe by visualizing, and at the same time feeling, the front two sides of your pelvis narrow toward your midline. Use only as much muscular power as you need to enact this image as you breathe. Most likely you have now isolated your transverse abdominal muscles. The internal oblique and external oblique muscles lie external to the transverse abdominal muscles and, save for a central sheath, they run diagonally upward to the midline and diagonally downward from the midline, respectively. To feel them work together, remain supine and imagine there is a melon the size of a cantaloupe inside your abdomen. As you exhale, gently squeeze this melon. Again use only as much force as you need to squeeze this imaginary object.

Feel the movement traveling in toward your lower back. Now you are using your internal and external oblique muscles. Embedded in the central connective tissue of the internal oblique muscles, the pair of rectus abdominis muscles is attached by tendons to the pubic bone and runs up the very center of your abdomen to the bottom of your breastbone, attaching there to sets of ribs on both sides. To feel them engage, put your chin to your chest and lift your head and upper torso off the floor. Curl the bottom of your spine, and lift this up toward your navel as well. Here you are mainly using the rectus abdominis muscles. The iliopsoas group of muscles is made up of the psoas major, the psoas minor, and the iliacus. These muscles, which travel deep into the pelvis, are attached to the lower back and connect to your inner thigh. They lift your thigh bones up in front of you, or help you bend forward from the hips, and they may be very strong, even if the muscles in the front of your abdomen are not. This muscle group is primarily responsible for lifting the legs in leg-lifting asanas, and in doing so they exert some pull on the lower back. Therefore, it is important that whenever you lift, you simultaneously engage the muscles of the abdominal wall to prevent strain.

### **Practices to Improve the Strength and Vitality of the Pelvic Center**

The following practices are in order of increasing difficulty. You may not be able to do all of them at first, so try only a few repetitions (3 to 5) of each exercise in the beginning. Please do not exceed your level by moving on to the more challenging exercises without being able to engage the proper abdominal muscles for support. If you practice at the level of difficulty that is right for you, you will soon notice your progress.

1. Lie on your back, with the knees bent and the soles of the feet on the floor. Engage the transverse abdominal muscles first, then the internal and external obliques. Inhale, and lift the feet off the floor by drawing the thighs into the torso. Exhale, and slowly lower the feet to the floor. As you do this, focus on the work of these girdle-like muscles, and notice how they keep the pelvis steady as you move the legs. If this feels too challenging, do the exercise one leg at a time. When the muscles of the abdominal wall are adequately engaged in leg-lifting or curling up the upper torso, the lower back is relieved of strain, and the muscles of the pelvic center are acting in balance.
2. Still in the supine position, lift the upper torso up onto your elbows. See if you can maintain the stability of the pelvic center by lacing the shoe and squeezing the melon (i.e. engaging the girdle-like muscles) as you lower and lift first one leg, then the other, and then alternatingly in a scissors-like fashion. Work with the legs extended, beginning about 20 degrees off the floor, or 45 degrees or higher if this is difficult. If you are able to maintain the activation of the girdle-like muscles easily, try working with both legs together, lifting to 90 degrees and lowering to 20 degrees, or higher if you need to. If you are not yet able to keep your lower back flat on the floor by narrowing and squeezing the transverse abdominal and internal and external oblique muscles, return to the earlier exercise, using one leg at a time, and practice that until your strength increases.
3. If you need more of a challenge, try some variations of this exercise, keeping the legs at the 20-degree level. First open and close the legs in a lateral scissors-like motion, alternating the top leg. Next draw one knee, then the other, into the chest in a bicycling motion.
4. For even more advanced work, begin the 20-degree lift with the extended legs pressed together. Circle the legs to one side, then up to your chest, to the other side, and finally lower them to the beginning position. Then repeat this circle in the opposite direction. Coordinate your breath with your movement, and remember to keep the girdle-like muscles engaged. If you want to work for greater articulation, draw a figure eight or some other design with your feet in the air. The remaining muscle groups of the pelvis can be toned overall through an activity in which you move your whole body in all directions (not just forward), such as tennis or dancing. Or create a simple program that includes walking or jogging up and down an incline, backward and to the side in a cross-stepping or circular pattern. Practices to Improve Pelvic Mobility When the pelvis is immobile, currents of dynamic movement cannot travel freely through this center. Stressing an area that is stiff can be the initial reason for back, knee, and other injuries, because mobility throughout the pelvis is essential for freedom in movement throughout the entire body.

To open the pelvis in every dimension you will need to rotate your legs in and out at the hips, stretch the backs of the legs (the hamstrings), and lengthen the deep hip flexor muscles. While many hatha yoga practices address these stretches, here is a simple series to use as a basis. As you feel the pelvis open, you may decide to include other hip-opening and torso- and leg-stretching postures to suit your specific needs. The Half-Lotus Pose (Ardha Padmasana) Sit with your spine erect and the legs extended in front of you. Bend the left leg and draw the heel in along the floor, toward or touching the right hip. Bend the right leg and place the right ankle on top of the left ankle. If you do not feel a stretch here, place the right ankle on top of the calf muscle of the left shin. For more stretch, place the right ankle on top of the left knee or mid-thigh. You may also wish to bend forward from the hips to deepen the stretch. Repeat on the other side.

## The Reclining Half Warrior Pose (Ardha Supta Virasana)

If you are quite stiff in your hip joints, try this gentle posture. Lie on your spine with knees bent and feet placed on the floor about 18 inches apart. Drop both knees to the left so that your lower body spirals to that side. You may feel a stretch in the muscle on the top of your right thigh. If you'd like more stretch, pull the right heel up to the pelvis, allowing the knee to drop to the floor. Extend the left leg downward so the thighs are touching. Allow the entire back side of the pelvis to fall into the floor. Relax and feel the released weight of your body stretching the muscles around your hip and thigh. To come out of this pose, bend the left leg, with the knee falling out to the left side, and roll onto your left side to sit up. This will protect your knee joints from any strain or torsion. Repeat on the other side.

## Warrior and Reclining Warrior (Virasana and Supta Virasana)

If you have a good amount of flexibility in your hips, sit directly between your heels with the palms placed on the soles of the feet. For more stretch, arch back to rest upon your elbows, and then finally rest your entire back on the floor. Stretch the arms overhead along the floor, palms together.

## The Hand-to-Foot Pose (Padahasthasana)

From a standing position, inhale and raise the arms overhead. As you exhale, hinge forward from your hips, keeping the torso long and the arms extended. If they reach, place the palms on the floor in front of or at the sides of the feet. If not, allow the spine to curve and let the arms and top of your head hang toward the floor. If this feels like too much of a stretch in your hamstrings, bend the knees slightly. To come up, inhale and either reverse this process or bend your knees and roll up through your spine, with the chin coming off the chest last. If this forward bend is painful for the back of your thighs, stand about three feet behind the back of a chair. Bend from the hips and reach to the chair. As you work to lower your torso while keeping the legs straight, you can use the chair for support. The chair may also allow you to remain longer in the posture.

## The Monkey Pose (Banarasana)

From a standing position, bend forward from the hips to place the palms by the sides of the feet. You may bend your knees to make this possible. Step well behind you with the left foot and bend the right knee, resulting in a lunge. Breathe fully and let the pelvis drop to the floor between your feet. If you like, bring the arms overhead with the palms together. If you are comfortable here you may want to bring the top of the left foot to the floor, as well as the knee. When you are ready, feel the alignment of the front leg and exhale as you press through that foot to bring the pelvis high and the feet together. Repeat on the other side. If this is too challenging, use two chairs, one in front of the other. Stand between them, and using the front one for support, bend the right knee and reach the left leg back onto the seat of the chair behind you. Holding the front chair, see how far you need to bend the right knee to feel a stretch in the front of the left hip. Repeat on the Restoring Youthfulness Keeping your pelvic center strong will give you more energy, aid in digestion and elimination, improve your overall health, and help you move with grace and agility well into later years. Keeping your pelvic center supple will allow you to remain as active as you want to be without injury, and maybe even put a spring in your step!

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