

Yoga for Dancers—Abdominal Integrity, Part the First

by Anna Rain

Why abdominal integrity? When the abdomen is first properly placed and then carefully strengthened, the pelvis sits comfortably. The low back is supported and can lengthen and broaden, which prevents compression (the root of most low back pain). When you have abdominal integrity, the upper torso has a base from which it can lift and open.

Abdominal integrity is not merely strength. In order for the internal organs to function properly, the abdomen must be in the correct place. If we focus on strength alone without correct placement, we get a strong muscle, yes, but one that creates incorrect action in the abdomen, foiling the desired results.

Many proponents of exercise emphasize “core strength.” I don’t use that phrase because it implies that the originating action is in the abdomen. I assert that if we use the arms and legs first, their correct engagement puts the abdominal muscles in the right place, and we can feel where they are supposed to be when in optimal alignment. Once we know where they should be, we can develop awareness that takes them there more and more frequently until we have a new and useful habit.

Spread-Apart Arms and Legs Pose

Stand on a yoga mat (helps to keep feet from slipping) or on a slightly grippy floor (kitchen floors often work well). Stand first with feet under your frontal hip bones (*CDSS News*, Summer 2009, in the section “Remedy Hyperextension”) and straighten the legs carefully by engaging the quadriceps. This is NOT “locking the knees,” but rather finding a straight leg by using the thigh muscles to align the joint properly.

Step the feet apart (if you’re new at this, start with two feet apart; if you are fairly strong, aim for four to five feet apart)

and make your feet parallel by taking the heels away from each other (see photo 1). Line up the little-toe side of the foot with the short edge of the mat or with lines on the floor. To engage the legs, press the little-toe side of the foot into the floor, and draw the front thighs up from the knee to the top of the thigh. Extend your arms out to the side, straight out from the shoulder, in a T. Stretch the arms so much that you feel you can touch both sides of the room (see photo 2).

With the arms and legs fully extended, lift the side body from the hips to the armpits. The more you keep the arms and legs firm and fully lengthened, the more easily the torso will lift. To summarize:

- Feet apart, with outer edges (little-toe side) parallel
- Front thighs drawn up/quadriceps engaged
- Arms stretched out in a T
- Torso lifted from the hips to the armpit

Now bring your attention to your abdomen. Keep the arms, the legs and the torso alive and stretched and see where your abdomen rests in this pose. It’s likely drawn taut toward the back body, without any clenching, gripping or holding in. Observe that sensation, and know that that is the fundamental action and correct placement of abdominal integrity (what others might call “core strength”).

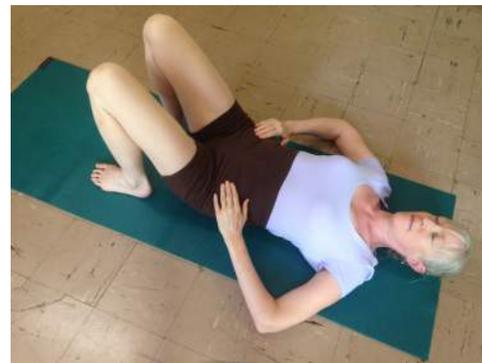
Can you recreate that sensation while standing with your feet closer (6-8 inches apart)? Stretch the arms out in a T first, and then bring them to your side. Lift the front thighs, roll the shoulders back, lengthen actively through your fingers, and see if you feel the abdomen engaged—but not clenched or gripped—toward the back body. If



1



2



3

you feel the abdomen lengthened while standing like this: Hooray! You're developing abdominal integrity!

Once you've been able to place the abdomen in correct alignment, I hope you find that having it there becomes easier and more habitual. Again, see that you are not "holding the stomach in": that action impedes correct functioning of the abdominal organs, and we want to support them and not constrict them.

Pose for Gentle Strengthening of Abdomen

Lie on your back with your knees bent. Lengthen the back of your neck so that your chin gently descends toward your throat; put a small support under your head if you need help making the back of the neck long. Now, with your fingers, find your frontal hip bones (see photo 3). Imagine your abdomen as a hammock in-between those bones. While you're on the floor, gravity helps place the abdomen correctly, engaged toward the back body. As you do this pose, you want to keep the abdomen in that place: drawn toward the back body. NB: keep the natural curve of the spine at the waist (see photo 4). Do NOT take the navel to the floor (we don't do this when we stand up—we don't want to train our body to do it when we're lying down!). For more detail on correct support for the natural curves of the spine, see "Align the Spine," *CDSS News*, Fall 2009.

Keep the abdomen fairly soft, toward the back body. It is engaged, but you don't want it hard. Place your fingers near your navel and press in slightly, so you can feel if the abdomen pops up. Now bring your knees to your chest, and then lower your feet very slowly toward the floor (see photo 5). When you feel your abdomen move toward your fingers (away from the back body), stop! That's the limit of your abdominal strength, and it's more important to build it gradually and thoroughly than to "win" (a.k.a. "cheat") by letting the feet all the way down without abdominal integrity.

Bring your knees back to your chest and repeat this carefully, with your full attention. See if on further attempts you can lower your feet closer to the floor. Once you can lower your feet all the

way down without disturbing the abdomen, you're ready to use your strength to lift the feet. The first time, lower to the floor, touch for a moment, and immediately raise the feet. To summarize:

- Lie on your back, knees bent, with fingers pressed gently on either side of the navel
- Preserve the natural curve of the spine at the waist; don't flatten the back
- Bring the knees to the chest
- Lower the feet toward the floor; stop when you feel the abdomen "pop" up
- Increase your capacity gradually until you can lower the feet all the way, keeping the abdomen gently engaged toward the back body
- Eventually, work toward lifting the feet from the floor with abdomen effortlessly taut toward back body

With this new information about abdominal integrity, revisit the pose "Lying Cross-Legged," from *CDSS News*, Spring 2015. Lying with the legs crossed and the arms actively lengthened overhead, you will find the same taut-abdomen action created by the grounding of the legs and the engagement of the arms.

These poses are intended to give you more awareness of how your abdomen might work to support you and your low back. Go gently. See that the engagement of the abdomen isn't clenching or gripping, but rather a smooth spread into the low back. Remember that using your legs and arms well will give you more information about how to keep abdominal integrity.

Develop a habit of bringing your attention to your abdominal action, and see if you can draw the abdomen gently toward the back body more and more during your normal movements of the day. Remember: no gripping, clenching or "holding the stomach in." Abdominal integrity is gentle, yet profound, and using its power precisely will bring optimal function to your torso, spine and low back.



Anna Rain is a certified Iyengar yoga teacher. Join her for English dance at CDSS Early Music Week and at Labor Day Weekend, both at Pinewoods. French mazurka makes her lush; Norwegian telespringar tingles her DNA; Scottish Strathspey opens her heart (she does love a man in a kilt!). Photos courtesy the author.