

Planks - How To Do Them Properly & Common Mistakes

A plank in a core workout is like a burpee in a cardio workout. No one likes doing them, but trainers love using them. And with good reason. Planks are one of the simplest body weight exercises you can do. They strengthen the 'deep' core muscles, the upper back, the lower back, the glutes and the shoulders, all important muscle groups in improving and maintaining good posture. They are versatile with many different versions to make them easier, harder, target slightly different muscles and to keep them interesting. But a simple exercise does not always mean it is an easy exercise. Wall sits anyone? So how do you know if you are doing a plank correctly, and what are the common mistakes made when performing this simple, but sometimes very difficult exercise.

This is what your standard plank should look like:

- Place your elbows directly under your shoulders with your forearms on the ground, gazing directly at the floor between your forearms.
- Squeeze your glutes, allowing the tail bone to tuck slightly, and engage your core by pulling the belly button towards the spine. Raise up onto your toes, forming a straight line from the base of the head to the heels of your feet.
- Make sure your shoulders are not up near your ears, they are pulled down and back.
- Keeping a neutral spine, hold this position, focusing on steady even breaths.

Common mistakes:

- Letting the hips drop towards the ground or pike up into the air. Your hips should be very close to in line with your shoulders. They should never be above shoulder line. They should be stable, even and maintaining that straight line down the back.
- Arching the upper back. Make sure your shoulder blades are pulled together to avoid arching the upper back and the shoulders taking all the load.
- Tilting head. Make sure you lift the head so that your chin is never near your chest. Look directly at the floor between your forearms to maintain that neutral spine.

There are many variations to a plank to make them easier and harder. The first step is to master the position on your knees. Tick all the boxes of what a plank should look like, and ensure you are not doing any of the common mistakes, then you can advance to the toes. Doing a correct plank on your knees is a better option than doing an incorrect plank on your toes. Once you have mastered the toe hold, it is time to build your endurance. It is one thing to raise onto your elbows and toes and hold until you collapse. It is a very different thing to hold the plank in a stabilized position with good breathing. Planks usually start off ok... for a few seconds. And then the burn starts. And it just keeps intensifying until you finally let go. But this burn is where the magic happens. This is where you build muscle strength and muscle endurance. This is where your core steps it up a level and becomes stronger than it was yesterday. You always want to try to hold your plank for a bit longer each time. And then you can start to add variety. Try adding a leg lift. Try an arm extension. Try a walking plank, or a side plank. But remember the fundamentals are always the same. Stabilize the position first, and if at any point the position is compromised, stop and start again.