

# Starting Strength

## Your Gut, Your Health, and Situps

by

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Here is a recent video of me deadlifting 500 pounds. Not very hard, eh? I still train pretty heavy for a 60-year-old guy.



[\[Click to watch video on YouTube\]](#)

BUT, you say, look at his gut. A fat slob, obviously. Can't be healthy. Healthy is *slim*. I am 5'8" and weigh 225. At 5'8", "normal" is considered to be – incredibly enough – 125-163 pounds. Overweight is 164-196, and I am "obese" at 225. In reality, my bodyfat percentage is about 24%, and a 60-year-old guy who deadlifts 500 is an anomaly in terms of muscle mass anyway. So I'm not worried about my body composition.

But still, *look at that gut*. "Shouldn't you just do some abs?" (I get some of the best article ideas from the comments sections.) Low bodyfat is healthy, and six-pack abs is the proxy for low bodyfat levels. And situps "burn" belly fat. If you just do your situps, you'll have a six-pack.

First, situps *do not burn belly fat*. A few seconds devoted to rational thought will reveal that muscles use fuel brought to them by the bloodstream, and the bloodstream comes from and goes to the whole body. Both fat and sugar are the fuel sources, depending on the intensity of the work being done, and neither serum fatty acids nor blood sugar burned by any muscle is derived from the adipose tissue immediately overlying that muscle. Fat doesn't just soak down into the muscle because you're making the muscle warmer by contracting it – the grease in a pan on your stove runs when it heats up, but it doesn't work this way in your body.

This idiotic idea – that muscles use the fat on top of them, and that exercising a muscle will therefore reduce the fat on top of the muscle – is known as "spot reduction," and some of the darker corners of the fitness industry still sell the concept. I have to be reminded occasionally that some members of the general public still believe this, because I don't deal directly with the general public much anymore, and it's easy to assume that people have gotten better educated about these things. Some apparently haven't.

The most popular areas that people try to spot reduce are abs and triceps, because these are the areas regarded as most unsightly when fat. Sorry, but it doesn't work anywhere, at any time, for

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anybody. When you lose bodyfat, it comes off of everywhere, just the opposite of the order in which it got deposited in the first place. So doing situps doesn't make your belly fat go away. I have a belly because I eat and drink too much, not because I don't do situps.

But, I don't do situps. Situps may also be counterproductive for your back; they were for mine. I used to get back "tweaks" quite frequently – the sharp pains many people get in various places in their lower backs, the kind chiropractors are famous for treating. Since I stopped doing them, my back hasn't bothered me much, and certainly not in the crippling way it did before, when I tried to heed the advice of most chiropractors and Physical Therapists by doing both situps and back extensions.

A large majority of the human race suffers from back pain, a consequence of bipedalism with a quadruped's spinal anatomy. Over time, upright posture produces degenerative changes in a structure that is poorly designed for an upright position. As changes and reductions in the intervertebral spaces between the bones of the spine begin to accumulate with age, pain can be the result.

But not always – the development of the MRI has answered lots of questions, and raised even more. Sometimes your back hurts when there is no diagnosable reason in the image, and sometimes a horrible back MRI study belongs to an asymptomatic back. "Good" backs may hurt like hell, and "bad" backs may not hurt at all.

I have learned a few things about this over 60 years of using my own back, and almost 40 years of teaching people to lift heavy weights with theirs. First, use good form when you pick up the lawnmower. Keep the load as close to your feet as possible, keep your back as rigid as possible, and don't rotate your back – move your feet to turn the load. Most back injuries don't happen in the gym.

Second, strong backs hurt less than weak backs. This isn't to say that strong backs don't hurt – my back had been hurting for 8 days before the deadlift you saw above, and it actually felt a little better afterward. But everybody reports that back pain improves as strength increases, probably for the perfectly sensible reason that stronger muscles are better able to stabilize a less-than-perfect spinal column. Squats and deadlifts *help* your back – they don't hurt it if you do them correctly, and doing them correctly is your obvious responsibility.

And finally, *situps and back extensions may be the worst thing you can do* for your painful back. Think about it: your discs are old and beat up, thinner and less flexible – does it sound like a good idea to wiggle them around and grind them against their poorly-separated adjacent bones?

Of course we need strong abs and back muscles. The squat and deadlift require a stable spine, and as the weights on these two critical exercises go up, so does the strength of all the muscles involved in both moving the load *and* stabilizing the spine. Obviously. There is no better abdominal exercise than squats and deadlifts, along with standing presses, and situps and back extensions are just not necessary for abdominal strength.

When you squat and deadlift with correct technique, i.e. a rigid back, you are both strengthening the muscles that hold the spine stable, and you're strengthening them according to their dominant function, i.e. holding your back rigid. This eliminates the need to flex and extend your spine in an attempt to strengthen it, i.e. doing situps and back extensions (which are essentially upside-down situps). These two exercises cannot be done with enough weight to make them even remotely comparable with squats and deadlifts as a source of back stabilizing strength.



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Furthermore, if your back is hurting, something is usually inflamed. If jamming the spine into a compromised position triggered the irritation, wiggling the compromised structures can increase the irritation, and thus increase the inflammation. Keeping your back rigid and internally motionless as you strengthen the muscles does not increase the irritation, and does not bother an older spine nearly as much as situps and back extensions do. Situps obviously don't hurt everybody, but if your back hurts already, situps may be part of the problem.

If your back hurts and you're doing situps, just try this for six weeks: Stop doing situps and back extensions. *Just stop.* Keep doing your other barbell work, and if you're not squatting and deadlifting now, start. Your abs won't get any weaker, your gut won't grow either, and your back pain will probably subside. Thousands of people have experienced this for themselves. Just try it and see.

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