

Ab Roller – Makes a Comeback!

Originally published 4 July 2019 · fatchfitness.com



Talk about a blast from the past. Recently there has been a renewed interest in the use of what is commonly known as the 'Ab Roller'. These are devices (which have been around for more than 50-years) are promoted to be used to develop "ABS OF STEEL".

Funnily, my first ever recollection of doing exercise was when I found one of these ab rollers in my mother's wardrobe in the early 1970's (I was probably 6-7 at the time) – I used the device as instructed and was so sore in the core/lower back for the next week I never touched it again!!

If you have had a chance to read any of my abdominal training articles you will get a clear picture that I am absolutely passionate about the appropriate development of core strength and the dangers of doing core exercises that are beyond your current capability (with the increased risk of doing damage to your lower back).

Just last week, one of my better conditioned young athletes hurt her lower back doing a much safer but still advanced version of the ab roller rollout (doing it in a pushup position on hands and feet only) – She overloaded her hip flexors attached to her lower back and was largely incapacitated for the next week!!

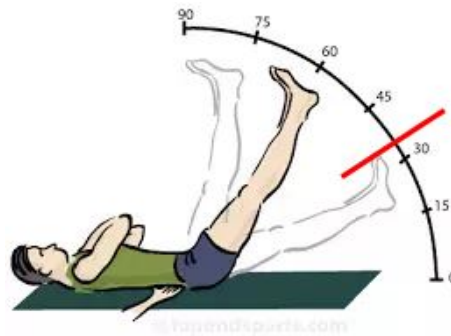
Having limited control in the extended range of this exercise is just so dangerous it really should be banned from every gym.

So lets go back to the start – what are we trying to train and what do we ultimately train when using this piece of equipment incorrectly (which is 99% of all users).

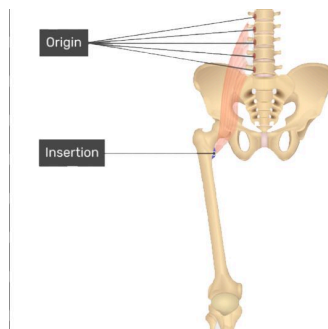
If you haven't yet, please review this article I wrote some time back:

Core Stability Exercise Progression

In this article I talked about the core progress you should make before thinking about heavy hip flexor core exercises (like feet supported situps, leg raises and Ab rollers!).



I highlighted that until you are able to complete level 7 and below 35° leg to floor angle, you shouldn't be doing advanced core exercises because your core just isn't able to support your pelvic position.



This will result in an overuse of hip flexors and the subsequent increased loading on their attachments (Psoas Major – Transverse processes, bodies and discs of all 5 lumbar vertebra).

During the leg lowering exercise, it is just your legs that are being lowered to the floor and their weight is substantially less than your upper body – BUT still most people can't get anywhere near the required 35° as shown above (without losing lower back pressure).

When you attempt to use the Ab Roller – you are requiring your core/hip flexors to take the brunt of your entire upper body weight (with increased torque being generated the further out your hands go).

If you feel pain/discomfort in your lower back during or after this exercise (sometimes it can be 1-2 days later) then this is a strong indication that the exercise is too advanced for your current state of core development and continuing to use this device may lead to longer term damage.

IS THERE A SAFE WAY OF USING THE AB ROLLER?

If you are intend on using this training device then I strongly suggest the following:

1. Always perform the exercise on your knees (the intro image is for super advanced athletes only).



2. How to hold your core when you are performing this exercise? I am amazed at the number of online images of this exercise where the model has an extremely anteriorly tilted pelvis at the start of or during the exercise!! This pelvic position is going to exacerbate the load on the lower back with a high chance of lower back pain/damage.



It is important to initially place your pelvis in a neutral or even partially posterior rotated position prior to beginning (this can be achieved through contracting your lower abdominals and squeezing your butt hard). The core contraction should be on compressing your obliques and contracting your belly button towards the ceiling.

3. The most important part of the exercise – When you start to roll out you MUST contract your lower abdominals/Obliques with as much force as you can so that there is no shift from your posterior pelvic tilt position to an anterior tilt. If you do this movement correctly three things will happen:



This is an excellent example of a posterior pelvic tilt that is maintained throughout the entire movement.



- a. You will not be able to roll out far before you are unable to maintain this pelvic position. Most people roll out well beyond what their core is able to handle, resulting in them moving into a large anteriorly rotated pelvis (see image) – thus passes most of the load directly onto their hip flexor muscles and the lower back attachments.
- b. You will feel like your lower abs are about to tear off the front of your pelvis!! Obviously they are not going to tear off, but this is how hard you should be holding onto your pelvis (stopping it from anteriorly rotating) by contracting your abs when rolling out on this device.
- c. If you do this above movement correctly, you will rapidly fatigue your Obliques/Transverse Abdominis (Deep core muscle) resulting in a mildly uncomfortable deep core fatigue that is a sign of working these deep core muscles effectively.
4. The exercise should be done very slowly – too much momentum will just transfer directly to your core/back and you will have even less chance of maintaining the correct pelvic position when extended.
5. As this exercise is highly advanced, keep the repetition range low – 2-3 sets of 3-5 repetitions should be more than enough for all but the most advanced trainer – particularly if you aim to take several seconds per repetition this is an extremely tough core workout.
6. I would suggest holding your breath during each repetition – this will aid in maintaining your intra-abdominal pressure which will assist in minimising your pelvis moving into an anterior tilt. (Don't forget to breathe b/w each repetition).

SUMMARY:

1. Use of the Ab Roller is an ADVANCED CORE EXERCISE.
2. If you are unable to perform well in the leg lowering exercise then I would avoid using the Ab Roller.
3. Always perform the activity on your knees (unless you are a highly advanced trainer).
4. Focus on a posterior tilted pelvis throughout the movement.
5. Only go as far out as you can maintain this posterior pelvic position.
6. Keep the movement slow and controlled at all times.
7. Keep the total sets and repetitions low as this exercise is very tough on your core musculature.
8. If you feel pain in your lower back during or after this exercise then this is a strong indication that the exercise is too advanced for your current state of core development.

