

8

Calisthenics



In this chapter you will learn about:

- ◆ Proper form and guidelines for performing calisthenics.
- ◆ Designing a calisthenic exercise program.
- ◆ Abdominal exercise techniques.

Calisthenics require minimal equipment and can be performed in almost any location. These exercises can be used to develop and maintain muscle strength and muscle endurance, and can be particularly useful when strength training equipment is not available.

Muscle Balance

As discussed in [Chapter 7](#), muscle balance is an important consideration when designing any strength workouts. Exercises should be selected according to which muscle groups they target ([Table 7-2](#)). [Table 8-1](#) lists several calisthenic exercises and the muscle groups they target. Use this table to design your calisthenic routine. Also, you can add any of these exercises to your gym-based strength and endurance routines to create variety and alleviate boredom.

Calisthenic Guidelines

When performing calisthenics to develop muscle strength or endurance, you should follow the same recommendations outlined in [Chapter 7](#). Intensity is largely based on the number of sets and reps, and the length of rest periods. Resistance is provided by body weight rather than an external resistance. Proper form for calisthenic exercises follows many of the general exercise guidelines outlined in [Chapter 7](#). Detailed instructions are found in [Table 8-1](#). (Table 8-1 was adapted from *The Navy SEAL Physical Fitness Guide*.)

To begin a calisthenics program select one exercise per muscle group from [Table 8-1](#). Perform this routine two to three times per week.

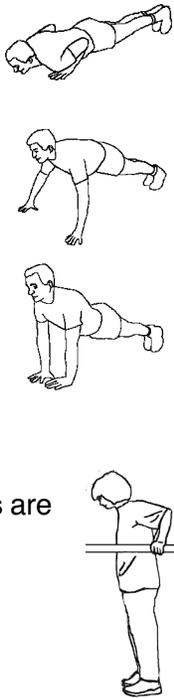
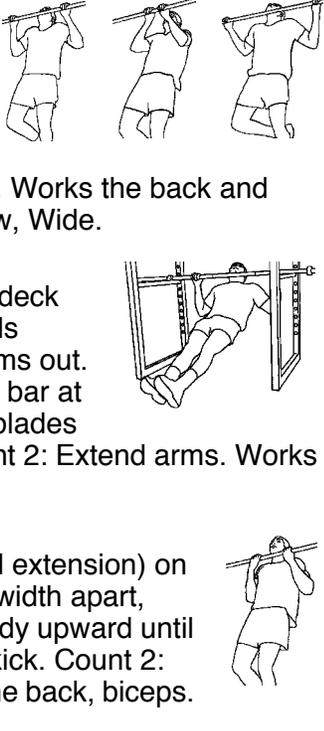
- ◆ For each exercise, start with one set of eight reps. Each set should take about one minute. Rest for 60 seconds after each set.
- ◆ Gradually increase your workout by adding one or two reps per week until you can perform twelve reps with good form.
- ◆ Once you have reached this point, do two sets of eight reps of each exercise. Again, increase your workout by one or two reps per set each week until you can perform two sets of twelve reps.
- ◆ Once you have reached this point, do three sets of eight reps; again, gradually increase your workout by one or two reps per set each week until you can do three sets of twelve reps.
- ◆ At this point you can increase the difficulty of your workout by: 1) changing the exercises you perform; 2) increasing the number of reps per set; 3) modifying the difficulty of the exercise; 4) decreasing your rest period; or 5) for each muscle group, do a different exercise during each one of your sets (for example, do one set of one-legged squats and one set of hand-to-knee squats as your two sets of leg exercises).

Once you can perform three sets of 12 reps, try some of the modifications listed below or in [Table 8-1](#) to increase the difficulty of the exercises. These modifications can be useful for developing and maintaining muscle strength when training equipment is not available.

- ◆ Gradually add weight (e.g., do pull-ups or push-ups with a weighted pack).
- ◆ Use a partner for resistance (e.g., have a partner push against your lower leg during leg extensions).
- ◆ Exercise one side of the body first (i.e., one-legged squats), then repeat the exercises for the other side.
- ◆ Modify the exercise (e.g., elevate legs during crunches).
- ◆ Perform super sets or pyramids (see [Chapter 7](#)).



Table 8-1. Calisthenic Exercises Arranged by Muscle Group

CHEST, SHOULDERS, ARMS	<p>Push-Ups Lie on stomach, feet and hands shoulder width apart on deck, head facing forward, body straight. Extend arms. Count 1: Bend elbows 90°, lowering chest toward deck. Count 2: Return to start position. Works triceps, chest, shoulder, and abdominals. Variations: Fingertip Push-ups - Begin as above, except use fingertips to support weight. Works forearms and improves grip strength. Triceps Push-ups - Begin as above, except place your hands close together beneath your chest and spread fingers apart. Your thumbs and index fingers of both hands should almost touch.</p> <p>Dips Rest hands on parallel bars. Extend arms; legs are not to support your weight unless needed for assistance. Count 1: Bend the elbows until shoulders are level with the elbows. Count 2: Extend arms to return to start position. Works triceps, chest and shoulders.</p>	 <p>The illustrations show a person performing push-ups in three variations: a standard push-up, a fingertip push-up, and a triceps push-up. Below these, a person is shown performing dips on parallel bars.</p>	BACK, ARMS	<p>Pull-Ups Begin from a dead hang on a horizontal bar, arms shoulder-width apart, palms facing out. Count 1: Pull body up until chin touches bar. Do not kick. Count 2: Return to start position. Works the back and forearms. Grip variations: Narrow, Wide.</p> <p>Incline Pull-Ups Using a low bar, lie or sit on the deck with chest under bar, place hands shoulder-width apart on bar, palms out. Count 1: Pull upper body toward bar at a 45° angle. Squeeze shoulder blades together during movement. Count 2: Extend arms. Works back, shoulders, and arms.</p> <p>Chin-Ups Begin from a dead hang (i.e., full extension) on a horizontal bar, arms shoulder-width apart, palms facing in. Count 1: Pull body upward until chin touches top of bar. Do not kick. Count 2: Return to start position. Works the back, biceps.</p>	 <p>The illustrations show three variations of pull-ups: standard pull-ups with shoulder-width palms out, incline pull-ups with a low bar and 45-degree angle, and chin-ups with shoulder-width palms in.</p>
NECK	<p>Neck Rotations Lie on back. Count 1: Lift head up and over to side. Count 2: Bring head to center; Count 3: Bring head to other side. Count 4: Return head to start position. Works neck flexors.</p>	 <p>The illustration shows a person sitting on the floor with their back to the camera, rotating their head from side to side.</p>	HIP FLEXORS	<p>Straight Leg Raise Sit on the edge of a bench, keeping back straight. Place hands behind you for support. Bend left knee 90°. Straighten right leg in front of you with your right heel resting on the deck. Count 1: Slowly raise your right leg, lifting it no higher than your hips, keeping your back straight. Count 2: Lower heel to 1 inch above the deck. Works hip flexors. Variation to increase difficulty: use an ankle weight.</p>	 <p>The illustration shows a person sitting on the edge of a bench with their back to the camera, raising their right leg straight out in front of them.</p>

ABDOMINALS (See "Abdominal Exercises" on page 70.)

Crunches

Lie on back, knees bent 90°, feet on deck, hands behind head, elbows back. Count 1: Lift upper torso until shoulder blades are off the deck, tilt pelvis so lower back is pressed to the deck. Lead with the chest, not the head. Count 2: Return to start position. Works abdominals and obliques. Variations to increase difficulty: bend legs and bring knees toward chest; extend legs vertically, straight in the air; or place a rolled towel under lower back. Arms may be placed (easy to most difficult) alongside body, across chest, hands behind head, or hands clasped above head.



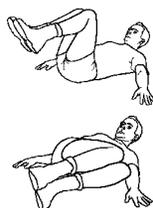
Crossovers

Lie on back, hands behind head, knees bent 90°, and feet on deck. Count 1: Turn slightly and lift torso, bringing left rib cage toward belly button. Count 2: Return to start position. Repeat on other side. Works abdominals and obliques.



Hip Rollers

Lie on back, legs bent and elevated off deck. Count 1: Slowly bring both knees down together to the right until lower back begins to rise off deck. Count 2: Return to start position. Works abdominals and obliques.



Hand to Knee Squat

Place feet shoulder-width apart, arms at sides. Count 1: Bend at hip and knees, keep back straight and feet flat, until your fingertips pass knees. Knees should not go beyond toes. Count 2: Push through the heels to return to start position. Works quadriceps, hamstrings, and gluteals.



LOWER BACK

Superman

Lie on stomach. Count 1: Lift opposite arm and leg (i.e., right arm, left leg) 6 inches off deck. Hold for 3-5 seconds. Avoid hyperextension of the back. Count 2: Slowly lower arm and leg to deck. Repeat using opposite arm and leg. Variation to increase difficulty: Add weights to arms and legs. Works lower back and gluteals.



Prone Back Extension

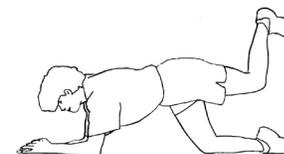
Lie face down, hands clasped behind back. Count 1: Lift upper torso until shoulders and upper chest are off Deck. Hold 3-5 seconds. Avoid hyperextension of back. Count 2: Return to start position. Variations to increase difficulty: Place hands behind back (easiest), behind head, straight over head (most difficult). Works lower back.



GLUTEALS

Rear Thigh Raises

Start on hands and knees and forearms. Lift left leg, keeping it bent 90°, so that left knee is no higher than hips. Keep back flat. Count 1: Lower left leg 6 inches. Count 2: Lift leg to start position. Switch legs and repeat. Works gluteals. Variation to increase difficulty: Straighten leg to be lifted.

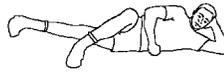


LEGS

LEGS

Burt Reynolds

Lie on left side with head supported by hand, bend right leg and place it in front of left knee. Count 1: Lift left leg approximately 8 inches off deck. Count 2: Lower left leg to 1 inch above the deck. Repeat for the right leg. Works inner thigh (hip adductors).

**Leg Lifts**

Lie on left side, bend both knees at a 90° angle from torso. Count 1: Lift right leg 6-8 inches, keeping knee and ankle level. Count 2: Lower right leg to 1 inch above left leg. Repeat for the left leg. Works outer thigh (hip abductors).

**One-Legged Squat**

Shift weight to right leg, lifting the left leg straight out in front of you. Count 1: Bend right knee until it is over your toes. Count 2: Push up through right heel to return to start position. Repeat using other leg. Works quadriceps, hamstring, and gluteal muscles.

**Calf Raises**

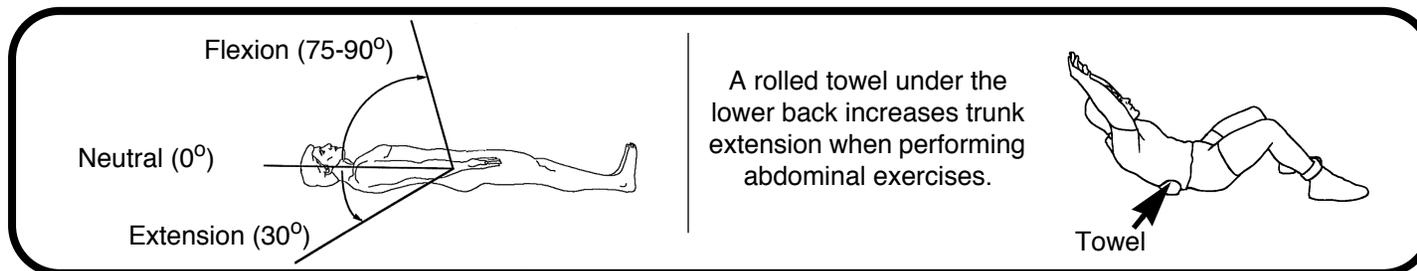
Stand on step with heels hanging off edge. Count 1: Lift heels 3 inches. Count 2: Lower heels 3 inches. Works calf muscles. Variations: Perform exercise with toes pointed inward, straight forward, and turned outward.



Abdominal Exercises

Abdominal muscles help support the lower back. Therefore, strong abdominal muscles can decrease the risk of developing lower back pain. When doing abdominal exercises on the deck, only a portion of the abdominal's range of motion is being strengthened because your lower back is flattened. However, by placing a rolled towel under your lower back you can extend the range of motion for abdominal exercises (see [Figure 8-1](#)).

Figure 8-1. Range of Motion of the Abdominals



In this section two common abdominal exercises, the curl-up and the crunch, will be described. The curl-up, used on the PRT as a measure of muscle endurance, targets both the abdominal and hip flexor muscles. The form for the curl-up is:

- ◆ Lie on back with knees bent, feet flat on deck, heels 10 inches from buttocks and held down by a partner. Cross arms and hands on chest or shoulders.
- ◆ Curl torso up, touching elbows to upper thighs while hands remain on the chest or shoulders. Exhale as you lift.
- ◆ Lie back until the lower edge of your shoulder blades touches the deck. Inhale as you lower.



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The crunch is similar to the curl-up but is performed within a smaller range of motion. The torso is lifted by abdominal muscles during a crunch. The form for the crunch is:

- ◆ Lie on back with knees bent 90°, feet flat on deck, shoulder width apart. Do not anchor your feet. (Anchoring your feet or placing your legs out straight on the deck will target your hip flexors, not your abdominals.)
- ◆ Place fingertips lightly on the back of the head, elbows out to sides and in line with ears. (Variations to this include arms at sides, arms across chest, and arms above head.)
- ◆ Lift torso until the shoulder blades come off the deck by moving rib cage toward hips. Exhale as you lift. Look up at the ceiling to prevent neck strain.
- ◆ Return to the starting position. Inhale as you lower.



Some people may develop lower back pain if they perform curl-ups routinely. For them, the crunch is recommended as an alternate exercise. Regardless of which exercise you choose when training, focus on the quality, not the quantity, of repetitions. If you perform either exercise rapidly, you are using momentum and not building abdominal strength!