

# FIX YOURSELF

Try these simple tests, discover your weaknesses, and get back to 100% By Sean Hyson, C.S.C.S.



**THE BAND HIP ABDUCTION STRENGTHENS THE GLUTEUS MEDIUS MUSCLE, A CRUCIAL HIP STABILIZER.**

Is your workout improving your body? We're not just talking about your biceps or your waistline, but your overall strength, flexibility, and resistance to injury. Can you touch your hands together behind your back? Can you reach in front of you while holding a plank?

See, even the best workout plans aren't perfect—they can't cover everything you need for a balanced, strong, and bullet-proof body at once. Invariably, some muscles are neglected, and that creates imbalances. That's why it's important to periodically test yourself and assess what needs work. We asked Liz Lowe, C.S.C.S., head program designer for a Sarasota, FL, gym that specializes in training clients with injuries, to prescribe three telling tests you can run on your body to identify weaknesses and DIY fixes to correct them fast.

## 1

### ARE YOUR HIPS TOO TIGHT?

**THE TEST:** Step-down with Heel Tap

**HOW TO DO IT:** Stand on a box or step that's 12–16 inches above the floor. Balance on one leg while the other hovers above the ground. Try to keep your hips level as you lower yourself with your supporting leg until the heel of your other foot taps the floor.

Then, stand back up by pushing through the heel of your supporting leg. Complete 10 reps, then switch legs and repeat.

**YOU FAIL IF:** Either hip hikes up or you lose balance. Also note if the knee of your supporting leg drifts inward or outward as you squat down or stand up.

**WHY THAT'S BAD:** "Inability to do this exercise may mean you have weak or tight hips, which can set up back and knee injuries," says Lowe. If your knees bow in or out, you're certainly at risk for knee pain.

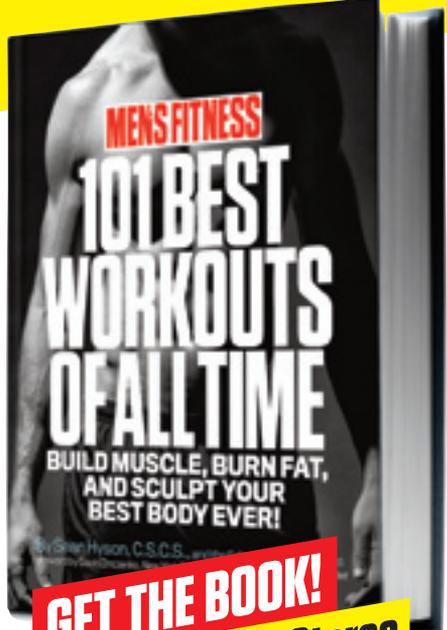
**FIX IT:** Attach a band to a sturdy object and stand perpendicular to it. Wrap the opposite end of the band around the ankle of your outer leg. Keeping your leg straight, raise it out to the side as far as you can. Perform four sets of 20 reps on each side.

To target your knee stabilizers, lie on your back on the floor with legs straight and turn one foot out 45 degrees, flexing your ankle to bring the toes closer to your shin. Squeeze your quads hard, actively thinking about the portion of the muscle that inserts into the kneecap. Hold the contraction and raise your leg 45 degrees in the air. Perform four sets of 15 lifts on each side.

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## GAME CHANGERS

# get fit



### DO YOUR SHOULDERS SUCK?

**THE TEST:** Scratch Your Back  
**HOW TO DO IT:** Stand and raise your right arm overhead, bend the elbow, and reach down the middle of your back. Now reach behind your back with the left hand. Try to make your hands touch. Repeat on the other side.  
**YOU FAIL IF:** There is space between your hands.  
**WHY THAT'S BAD:** "It means lack of shoulder mobility, and that can lead to shoulder injury, especially if you bench press," says Lowe.  
**FIX IT:** Use a lacrosse ball to roll out your pecs and shoulders. Hold the ball against a wall and press your body into it. Roll the muscles out slowly, lingering on any areas that feel especially tender. Afterward, perform

IYT raises: Lie face-down on an incline bench and raise your arms overhead with thumbs pointing up to form an I shape. Perform 15 reps, then raise your arms to 45 degrees to make a Y shape. Do 15 reps, and then another 15 with your arms at 90 degrees (a T shape). Perform three sets like that.  
"Strengthening the little muscles around the shoulder makes the joints more stable," says Lowe.

*Come together. Touching hands means flexible shoulders.*



### IS YOUR CORE STRONG ENOUGH?

**THE TEST:** Plank with Reach  
**HOW TO DO IT:** Get into a plank position (set up for a pushup and rest your forearms on the floor). Your body should form a straight line from your heels to the top of your

head. Keeping your shoulders square to the floor, reach one arm straight out in front of you. Return the arm to the floor and reach with the opposite arm. Perform five reaches on each side.  
**YOU FAIL IF:** You twist to either side or lose alignment.  
**WHY THAT'S BAD:** "If you can't hold the position, your core is not fully engaging," says Lowe. "The entire trunk of the body needs to be able to work together. If it doesn't, lower-back pain can result. You'll also be limited in terms of how much weight you can lift on exercises like the squat and shoulder press."  
**FIX IT:** Practice the conventional plank. Do three to four sets, holding it a few seconds shy of as long as you can. "On the last set, hold as long as possible," says Lowe. "And don't bring your hands together—keep your forearms pointing in front of you. It's harder." Build up over time to hold the plank for 90 seconds.

## HARD FACTS

OUR TRAINING DIRECTOR, SEAN HYSON, SOLVES YOUR WORKOUT CONUNDRUMS



### "WHEN SHOULD I USE SUPER-SETS VERSUS STRAIGHT SETS?" —GREG M., OPELOUSAS, LA

Supersets, where you perform a set of two different exercises back to back with little or no rest, are a great time-saver. Generally, you use them for opposing muscle groups, such as chest and back, so that one area can recover while you train the other one, thereby reducing the time needed to rest. Last May, the *Journal of Strength and Conditioning Research* found that subjects who supersetted leg extensions and leg curls also performed better: They completed more reps on the leg extension when the leg curl was done immediately beforehand than when done alone, despite getting no rest in between lifts. In fact, when the subjects did rest, even up to 30 seconds, they completed significantly fewer reps and were shown

to be activating less muscle in their quads. The likely reason? Working an antagonistic muscle group increases the nervous system's activation of the agonist—in this case, training the hamstrings allowed the quads to work better.

Straight sets (do a set of one exercise, rest, and repeat) have their place when you're going heavy. You simply need extra time to recover from high-intensity sets of exercises like the deadlift or bench press, so you'll typically do those moves by themselves. To get the best of both worlds, do your main strength lifts as straight sets and superset your assistance exercises.

Sean Hyson, C.S.C.S., is the Men's Fitness training director and author of *101 Best Workouts of All Time*, available at [101bestworkouts.com](http://101bestworkouts.com). E-mail him at [asksean@mensfitness.com](mailto:asksean@mensfitness.com).

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