

Why Crawling Fixes Everything

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Have you ever met a baby with back pain? How about a toddler with tight hips? Considering these and other ailments seem to be a common side effect of aging, do infants and toddlers hold the secrets to being forever supple?

It's important to note that many factors make infants and children so mobile and devoid of the aches and pains that many adults experience. Some key movements they perform on a regular basis, however, help "grease the groove" to create strength, stability, and mobility.

It's not surprising, then, that the fitness and rehab fields have seen a boost in the popularity of infant movement patterns. Exercises involving rolling, rocking, squatting, and crawling are used to get people out of pain, while providing them with a unique movement challenge.

One of the most popular movements is the crawl, and it is used for everything from ADHD treatment to a grueling, fat-blasting exercise. For years, I have used the crawl in personal-training programs, both as an assessment tool and as a "cure all" for clients ranging from children to professional athletes.

The crawl pattern offers a variety of benefits for nearly every part of the body.

Crawling and the Brain

The brain and body have a back-and-forth, plastic relationship. The brain develops so the neural system can tell the body to do more stuff. The body does more stuff, which sends feedback to the brain and causes the brain to develop more. This relationship continues for life.

Crawling requires both sides of the brain to work together, because limbs on both sides of the body must move synchronously (called a contralateral movement pattern). To make this happen, information must be passed through a "highway" that links the two sides or hemispheres of the brain called the corpus callosum.

When a lot of information must be passed through the corpus callosum (as it does during a crawl pattern), new neural connections must be formed and strengthened. It appears this can help improve coordination, learning, and even behavior in both kids and adults.

Crawling and the Shoulder Complex

Unfortunately, becoming an adult is often synonymous with sitting at desks and cars. Joints that don't move become stiff, painful, and unhappy. Additionally, the muscles around inactive joints become weak and unable to properly stabilize and mobilize. Other muscles are often recruited to do the work.

Crawling requires the scapulae and other joints involved with shoulder movement to move in a proper pattern. At the same time, a small amount of compression is placed on these joints while supporting the upper body against gravity. This small amount of compression is often just enough to fire proprioceptors that reignite muscles involved with stability and mobility. The result is more mobility, less rigidity and pain.

Crawling and the Hands

Our hands have a disproportionate supply of nerves compared to much of the rest of the body. Manual dexterity is extremely important to being human. Unfortunately, the hands that were once used to chop wood, pick up heavy stuff and thread needles now spend most of the time striking a keyboard.

Crawling (particularly when actively gripping the ground) provides proprioceptive feedback from the palms of the hands, which keep these valuable appendages strong and dexterous.

Crawling and the Core

The core is not so much a muscle, but a relationship of the anterior/posterior shoulder, hip, and trunk. During contralateral patterns, this entire relationship is engaged. As the hand makes contact with the floor and the shoulder extensors engage, the alternate hip must also engage. The “core” relationship is responsible for making sure energy is transferred across the midline of the body smoothly and synchronously.

Those with poor core stability will display a pronounced “wagging” of the hips as they crawl. This could be an underlying issue stemming from a variety of issues.

Crawling and the Hip Complex

Again, all sitting and no play makes for unhappy joints. Inactivity makes the muscles that flex, extend, rotate, adduct, and abduct the hips stop firing properly. Merely getting into the crawl position and rocking the hips back toward the heels, like an infant does prior to crawling, functions to help the mobility of the hip complex.

Initiating a moving crawl triggers dormant muscles in the hips to mobilize and stabilize to match and accommodate the upper-body motions on the other side of the midline. This helps the hips move better, which results in not only healthier hips, but also a healthier lumbar spine.

As you can see, the crawl pattern packs a lot of bang for its buck. Start in the “all-fours” infant position, and then progress to lifting the knees off the floor

