

Indian Club Chain Marching

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We were made to move. There is no other way around that one fact. We weren't created for chairs, or for standing motionless in one spot. We were not even made to do heavy barbell squats or olympic lifts. We created those things, but we were not made for those things. Life doesn't happen in a shoulder-width stance. Life happens with one foot behind the other. We were created to simply move from one spot to another. We were made for locomotion.

It is locomotion, moving from one spot to the next, that grows and develops our brain. As a child, you learned how to lift your head, roll, slide, drag, and crawl all in an effort to explore your world. These movements stimulated and nourished your brain. Children develop their nervous systems and muscular systems perfectly through learning how to move across the floor.

By design, we were made to perform cross-lateral movements when we travel. Crosslateral movements, sometimes called midline crossing movements, are simply locomotive movements like crawling, climbing, walking, skipping, marching and running where your opposite limbs move and work together in a deliberate, coordinated fashion. Cross-lateral movements actually create neural connections between the two hemispheres of your brain and make your brain/body connection more efficient. The more we crawl as a child, or an adult even, the more neural connections we can create and establish between our two hemispheres. In other words, cross-lateral movements like crawling actually improve the communication between the two hemispheres in your brain, thus improving the communication between your brain and your body. Crosslateral movements are crucial for both brain development and physical development.

Question: If cross-lateral movements are crucial for our mental and physical development, and we spend our childhood learning how to move from point A to B, thus improving and developing our entire body, what does a lifetime of sitting and being stagnant (that should be static) do? Better yet, what about a lifetime of mostly sitting still with 2 to 6 hours devoted to strength training while our feet kept at a shoulder-width stance for most of the time? We are not keeping our brains and bodies healthy. We are aging and decaying ourselves. We are losing our resiliency. Locomotion, cross-lateral movement, keeps us healthy. It gives us vitality.

I know you are probably thinking about all those times you have gone to the mall and walked from one end to the other and yet you probably don't feel too resilient. A lifetime of being motionless is hard to overcome with a few bouts of moving from point A to point B. It is actually supposed to be the other way around: we should spend a lifetime of moving from point a to point b with a few bouts of being motionless. None-the-less, a sedentary life can rob us of our most basic movement patterns. Most people do walk some in their day to day life, but they do not walk deliberately swinging their opposite arms, from the shoulders, in stride with their opposite legs. Remember the adage about having to crawl before you walk? It is easy to fake walking. It is hard to fake crawling. If you can't crawl too well, you may not be walking all that well either!

The good news is that the body is resilient, and cross-lateral movements can create growth, development, strength and vitality at any age. It is never too late to learn to crawl! Or walk, march, skip or run for that matter. You were created to do these things! When the body does what the body was designed to do, very good things happen. Cross-lateral movements can be very restorative for the body. Crawling alone can help tie the body together by building reflexive strength and stability throughout the entire body. Yes, simply learning how to crawl can help you become as strong and healthy as you were meant to be.

If we engage in what we were designed to do, we create a solid movement foundation from which we can build an amazingly resilient and healthy body. As I mentioned earlier, cross-lateral movements are movements in which the opposite limbs move together deliberately, usually to get you from one place to another.

We should be moving deliberately every day. We should be engaging in cross-lateral movement patterns every single day. Not only should we be engaging in cross-lateral movements every day, it might also be a good idea to strength train with these patterns as well. After all, babies are strength training when they lift that big watermelon up (their head) and crawl around. It might be a good idea for us to do the same thing: strength train while we reinforce our cross-lateral movement patterns, or strength train while we perform locomotion. John Brookfield and I have found several deliberate ways to reinforce our cross-lateral movement patterns while we are strength training. One exercise we like in particular is Indian Club marching while dragging a heavy chain (Indian Club Chain Marching for short).

In this exercise, you put on a harness, attach a ninety-six pound chain (sold by Perform Better) to the harness and march while holding Indian clubs in your hands. The act of marching requires deliberate cross-lateral coordination. Done alone, it can be a very restorative, or resetting, movement for the body. Marching with Indian clubs while pulling a heavy chain can also be restorative, while at the same time, it can be a great way to safely build strength throughout your entire body.

Let's take a closer look at why this is such a great exercise. First, we will start with holding the Indian clubs. The Indian clubs seem to make a natural, weighted extension of the arms. Marching with the Indian clubs encourages deliberate arm swing from the shoulders, not the elbows, thus getting the shoulders and hips to work together in a coordinated fashion. The clubs also facilitate great shoulder extension during the backswing of the arms, something most of us don't get too often, if at all.

Also, because the clubs are held in the hands, the muscles of the arms, shoulders, and trunk can be further stimulated by the mechanoreceptors, sensory nerves, in the palms. These mechanoreceptors are normally stimulated by pressure being applied to the palms, like when you crawl or squeeze something tight. The Indian clubs are light, but they can be squeezed for extra pressure. If you stimulate these sensory nerves in your palms, you stimulate the muscles they are reflexively wired to. This can help encourage both reflexive strength and stability.

Now, let's take a look at what the heavy chain does. The chain is attached to the harness on one end and then stretched out for its entire length. This creates smooth friction as the chain is being dragged. Marching with the chain attached to the harness makes the entire core tense up reflexively as the chain generates friction. The more friction the chain generates, the tighter your core becomes. You can actually feel all the guide wires (muscles) around your spine tensing up and aligning your spine perfectly as the chain grabs the ground. Your trunk muscles will not allow you to drag the chain with poor posture. It is much like the way a child's heavy, large head causes his trunk muscles to tense up as he starts learning to stand and walk. This is strength building - reflexive strength building. You don't even need to think about it. It just happens.

Another great thing about marching with the chain is the marching itself. Marching while dragging the chain makes you want to land on the ball of your foot instead of the heel. This is great for stimulating the hamstrings and glutes, especially if you are wearing minimalist shoes, or going barefoot. Minimalist footwear while marching with the chain will really stimulate the mechanoreceptors on the bottom of your feet, thus training and building some great reflexive strength throughout the legs and core. If you try this exercise, you will feel your hamstrings and glutes talking to you very quickly!

There are some other obvious benefits of Indian Club Chain Marching like strength endurance, cardiovascular endurance and increased over-all work capacity. Training this way just simply makes you tough and resilient. What should be noticed most about this exercise is that it is relatively safe. There is no weight bearing down on you at anytime. All the weight is on the ground behind you. If you get tired, you just stop and your muscles can recover. This exercise is self-regulating.

This drill is also very easy to progress. You can use time traveled, distance covered, and weight of the chain(s) as your variables. If you use time, all you have to do is see how much ground you can cover in a set time period and record the distance you traveled. If distance is your variable, determine a set distance you want to travel and record the time it took you to do so. Simply try to improve some facet of your performance with each training session. Be patient and be consistent. After a couple of weeks, your stamina and strength will improve and you will be able to go farther and longer, increasing your strength and stamina while you are reinforcing good patterns all along the way.

The strength and stamina benefits from this exercise alone are great, but don't forget, with this exercise we are also nourishing our brain by building, maintaining, and reinforcing neural connections between our two hemispheres. This increases our efficiency at everything we do. We are also coordinating and reinforcing a cross-lateral movement pattern, the pattern for our gait, and building a solid movement foundation. The better our movement base is, the healthier and stronger we can become.

Indian Club Chain Marching is a tremendous tool for building a healthy, capable and resilient body. Most other "health producing" exercises put us in a shoulder-width stance that we don't move out of until we are done with our set. Life doesn't happen with our feet side by side. Maybe we shouldn't always train that way. Indian Club Chain Marching simply allows us to train in a way we were designed to move. It is simple, and it is very effective. Try it twice a week for two months and judge for yourself.