

Addicted to Planking: Plank Challenge Survivor

(Originally Published March 27, 2014. Available for full view with pictures [->HERE<-](#) on the Eccentric Eclectic's Blogs about Everything and Anything)

During the end of 2013, there was a meme going around on Facebook about the plank challenge. You may have seen this image below:

(Plank challenge position meme image)

The challenge was as follows:

For 30 days, you, the acceptor of the challenge, would hold the plank position for a designated period of time each day, and that period of time would increase throughout the 30 days. By the end of the challenge, you would be able to hold the plank position for 270 seconds (4 ½ minutes).

If you look at the picture above, the position doesn't look really difficult. Or so I thought.

With so many of my friends participating in the challenge, I thought I could at least give it a try. After all, I had done some planking before, but not for any long duration of time. Plus, some of the main muscle groups targeted by the challenge, according to the image, were spots I wanted to work on.

My Experience

First of all, let me point out that when I plank I place a memory foam cushion under my elbows, since I suffer from chronic pain/tendinitis. The cushion does not aid me in the actual plank position, but the cushion does keep my elbows from going into mind-numbing pain. Second, I am not an 8-hours-a-day gym person. I'm a regular person trying to get in shape. I work out about 3-5 times a week, and I only work out for 30-60 minutes at a time.

My first week of the challenge was not difficult at all. I started by holding the position for 20 seconds on days one and two, moved up to 30 seconds, and then 40 seconds by day five. The challenge then instructs you to take a day off; actually, you get a day off every five or six days.

Things became slightly more difficult during the second week. During this week, I started off by holding the position for 45 seconds, and then for a minute, and on the last day before the break I had to hold it for 90 seconds.

It took me three tries before I could finally hold the position for a full 90 seconds!

The first two days of week three were also 90 second holds. To be honest, those days were miserable. I could feel my entire body shaking. The muscles in my arms burned. My feet

cramped up. And my ab muscles kept twitching. Nevertheless, I gritted my teeth, shouted expletives, and made it through.

On the third day I was scheduled to hold the position for a full two minutes. I was expecting it to be two minutes of torment, but instead the time flew by. I got a little shaky toward the end of the hold, but the pain from the previous few days didn't occur. It was like after suffering through three days of 90 second holds I had been transformed into a planking machine.

I continued the challenge over the next few weeks, although I had to extend the challenge, since I missed several days due to a horrendous bout of flu. Finally, though, I made it to the 270 second mark, and I kept on planking.

In January 2014, I made it to five minutes.

On that morning, my partner had knocked on the door to ask me a question. I told him I was halfway through my five-minute plank and that I wasn't about to stop. He made the smart decision and cheered me on through those last 2 ½ minutes. The final 30 seconds took forever! I was bellowing out my time left as a distraction, which I'm sure sounded strange, but my partner just kept rooting for me to make it. As the timer on my phone went off, signaling that the five minutes were over, I slowly released the hold and in a singsong voice I started chanting, "I did it! I did it!"

Results

According to Jessica Burns' self-named blog, "It's Time to Burn," doing this particular plank position, (a.k.a. the elbow plank), targets the following areas:

- Abs (including the six-pack area and the upper ab muscles right by the rib cage)
- Back (especially the muscles by the spine and lower rib cage)
- Neck and shoulders (Rotator cuffs, Trapezius, Deltoids, and Rhomboids)
- Chest
- Butt
- Legs (calf muscles and quads)

After planking for a month, my shoulders and my upper arm muscles felt stronger and they definitely had some visible definition. I am nowhere close to having the coveted six-pack, but I can see a bit of toned muscle in the abdomen area, which rocks! My derrière might be slightly more toned, but it's not immensely noticeable. My calves feel solid, but, as a short person, I do a lot of movements that strengthen those muscles, so I can't say the improvements are strictly plank-related.

Oddly enough, one of the places I have noticed the most new muscle development has been in my hamstrings, (the backside of my upper legs). It's not surprising that my leg muscles would improve, since I'm using those muscles to keep the plank position stable. However, most of the fitness journals I have researched did not seem to mention this muscle group as receiving any noticeable benefit from the plank position.

Now What?

After 30 days of planking, I could not stop myself. I enjoyed the way the position felt and I liked how it has been slowly sculpting parts of my body. Plus, it's an excellent exercise to do before or after your cardio.

I have tried to add a few challenges to the move. For instance, I tried to do donkey kicks (left) and knee tucks (right) while in the plank position.

(Donkey kick image, and fresh-body-plank-knee-tuck image)

Although it felt good to do these leg movements, and it certainly intensified the workout, I noticed a negative side effect. I might have been overextending my legs during the donkey kicks, I'm not certain, but my lower abdomen muscles, (right beneath my tummy roll), started to get sharp, lingering pains after the workout. The pain made sitting and getting up difficult, so I stopped doing those movements and went back to just regular planking.

Right now I'm planking for four minutes, resting/stretching for one minute, and then planking again for another four minutes. I'll be increasing to two 4 ½ minute holds very soon.

During my research for this article, I found Tina Reale's article about extra movements to liven up your planking routine. Although I had a negative experience with the donkey kicks and knee tucks, I might give these following moves a chance:

(Embedded YouTube instructional video)

A Word of Warning

Obviously, don't start planking if you're not in the right condition to exercise. Beyond that bit of common sense, I would highly advise doing LOTS of stretching before and after you plank.

I realize that I suffer from tendinitis, and I use stretching as a method to alleviate my pain and increase my stamina. Regardless, planking causes you to make your muscles work overtime to keep your body still. You want to make sure your muscles are ready to deal with that sort of strain, especially the muscles in your shoulders, neck, and legs.

Stretch before you plank. Stretch between planks. And stretch after you plank. You'll be able to plank longer, and your muscles will thank you.