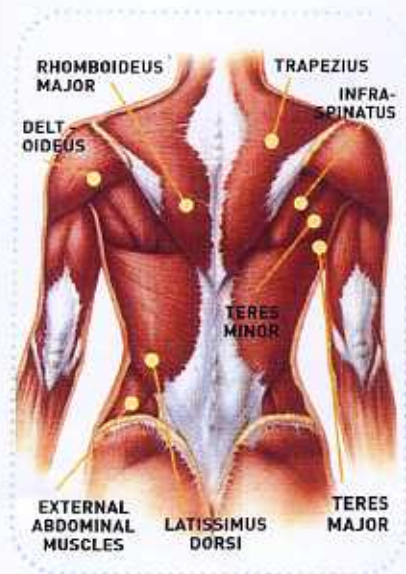


Fitness model Leigh Hickombottom has a back-training workout that packs a one-two punch: not only does it help you create a toned and sexy back but it's designed to keep your back healthy and pain-free. "Back is by far my favorite body part to work," she says. (This coming from a woman who has washboard abs and perfectly sculpted glutes.) "Not only does a strong back help prevent injuries, it also improves your posture. Women who train their backs seem to stand up straighter and have more confidence... not to mention that everything worn backless looks fabulous!"



"Women who train their backs seem to stand up straighter and have more confidence."

And she should know. At five-foot-three and 112 pounds, Leigh is a natural athlete who presents such a tight and taut physique she might otherwise intimidate mere mortals if it weren't for her easy-going, down-home charm. Born in Mississippi and raised in Texas, this devoted mom and animal lover now lives in Orlando, Florida, with nine-year-old daughter Kierra, their dog and

BUILD A BETTER BACK

Bring your back into **high definition** with this twice-a-week plan.

BY PEGGY HALL | PHOTOGRAPHY ROBERT REIFF

Leigh's Weekly Workout

MONDAY: Back Workout One and abs

TUESDAY: Shoulders and triceps;
45 minutes cardio

WEDNESDAY: Chest and biceps;
45 minutes cardio

THURSDAY: Legs

FRIDAY: Back Workout Two and abs;
20 minutes of cardio

three cats. Leigh says her healthy lifestyle helps her "tackle every part of life head on, with a big Southern smile," and believes that any physical and mental challenges simply keep her "moving forward in life." In fact, the only time she ever looks back is to glance over her shoulder to check out the hard-earned results of her training!

Indeed, most of us could benefit from looking behind us a bit more frequently. The back isn't the first thing we see when we look in the mirror, so it's often the last thing we have in mind when it comes to training. For some women, the only time they think about their back is when it aches! Fortunately, Leigh's twice-a-week back workout will bring your back to the forefront of your training. But don't worry about developing the linebacker look. "You are in control of the gains you make by the style of training you choose," Leigh explains. "For toning and sculpting, do three sets of 15 reps for each exercise using a moderate weight. For a bigger, fuller back, do three sets of 12 reps with a heavier weight." If you're new to exercising or coming back from an injury, start with one or two sets for the first few weeks, using lighter resistance. Then add the third set and use heavier weights when you're feeling stronger. You should see noticeable gains in strength and definition in about four weeks. Leigh recommends a 60 second rest interval between each set. "With all of these exercises, it's important to contract and squeeze the muscle at the peak of the movement for a two-four count pause."

Back Workout One:



assisted pull-ups

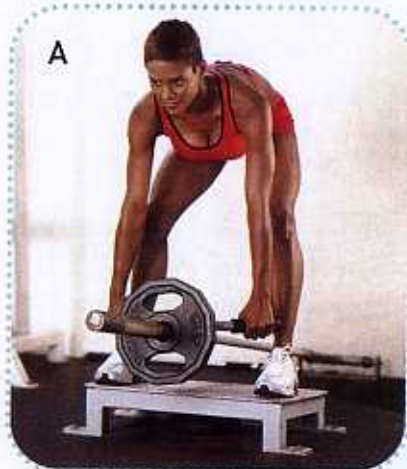
You'll work your entire back with this movement. Select your desired resistance. (On this machine the higher the number, the easier the work.) Take a wide overhand grip on the pull-up bar and place your feet on the lower support bar. Look up toward your hands and pull your chest to the bar. Slowly lower with control. Avoid gripping your hands too tightly. Focus on using your back rather than your arms to execute the movement.



bent-over rows

Grasp a barbell with a wide overhand grip and stand with your feet together. Keeping your back perfectly straight and parallel to the ground, hinge at your hips and bend your knees slightly. Stay in this position (which is working the spinal erectors, or stabilizing muscles of the back) and slowly pull the bar up to your chest. Focus on squeezing your scapula (shoulder blades) together. Slowly lower and repeat for reps. Experiment with a narrower grip to hit your back at a different angle.

With all of these exercises, it's important to contract and squeeze the muscle at the peak of the movement for a two-four count pause.



T-bar rows

Stand on the T-bar platform with your feet wide apart and your knees slightly bent. Take an overhand grip on the handles (an underhand grip will place more work on the biceps) and bend your torso about 45 degree. Keep your back straight throughout the movement to prevent injury. Draw the bar toward you until the plates nearly touch your chest and repeat for reps. Similar to bent-over rows, this exercise really isolates the lats, teres major, traps, rhomboids and posterior delts.



back extension

Lie face down on the extension apparatus with your hips on the support pads and your feet hooked under the ankle supports. Keep your elbows bent (beginners) or hug a weight plate to your chest (advanced) and arch your spine as you raise your torso. Slowly lower your upper body toward the floor. It's crucial to perform this exercise without swinging. Move in a controlled manner, focusing on the working muscles of the lower back as well as the glutes and hamstrings.



deadlift

Take a wide overhand grip on a barbell and stand with your feet hip-width apart and knees slightly bent. Keep your back straight and head up as you bend at the hips, lowering the bar close to your feet. Now straighten your body, flexing at the hips and squeezing your glutes. Lower with control to the starting position. (To increase your hamstring flexibility, do these on a platform.) Deadlifts are excellent for strengthening the spinal erectors of the low back. If you have any back problems, be sure to start out with a lighter weight.



Leigh's Lifestyle Diet

Going to extremes in any part of dieting is not something Leigh allows. "The importance of eating healthy was instilled in me since childhood," she explains. Although she never lets her weight fluctuate more than five pounds, Leigh is tempted (like most of us) by sweets and junk food. To keep those cravings in check, once a week she allows herself a favorite treat or dessert – usually Marble Slab Creamery's peanut butter ice cream with caramel! Other than that, she focuses on lean proteins and lots of veggies. Her best tip? "Hydrate, hydrate, hydrate!"

Meal 1 (5:30 a.m.):

1/2 cup oatmeal, 5 egg whites

Meal 2 (8:30 a.m.):

1/2 cup oatmeal, 1/2 cup fat-free cottage cheese

Meal 3 (11:30 a.m.):

1 scoop low-carb whey protein, 1/2 cup brown rice, 6 oz chicken

Meal 4 (2:30 p.m.):

4 oz chicken, steamed broccoli

Meal 5 (4:30 p.m.):

6 oz grouper, green beans

Meal 6 (7 p.m.):

1 scoop protein, turkey breast

wide-grip pulldown

Sit facing the pulldown machine and secure your knees under the pads. Take a wide overhand grip on the bar. Arch your back slightly and pull the bar down to your upper chest in a controlled motion. Slowly extend your arms to complete the movement. This exercise mainly hits the center part of the lats and the lower portion of the traps.



close-grip pulldown

Take an overhand grip on the pulldown bar with your hands about shoulder-width apart. Arch your spine and slightly tilt your upper body away from the apparatus. Focus on using the muscles in your mid and upper back (traps and rhomboids) as you draw the bar close to your chest. ■