

By Fara Kearnes

## **Abdominal Training: Exercises to Create Washboard Abs**

A flat stomach or a well-defined six-pack is the envy of just about everybody and has become the mark of a physically fit individual. The problem is most people would like to have killer abs without having to work for them. They waste money on TV ab exerciser gadgets, do a pathetic set or two, and give up. So how can you seriously approach sculpting your stomach if you're not genetically blessed with washboard abs?

Flattening the stomach is not achieved through "spot reducing" exercises—not that there is such a thing. The only way to develop well-toned abs includes total body training, proper diet, cardiovascular exercises and strength training.

But first, let's look at the abdominal musculature: The largest muscle of the abs group is the Rectus Abdominus which is the long, partitioned, single muscle running straight up and down the center of the abdomen, and commonly referred to as the "six pack." The other two muscle groups that complete the abdominals are the Transverse Abdominus, and the External and Internal Obliques. The Transverse Abdominus, located at your sides, acts as "nature's girdle" keeping in your innards; and the Internal and External Obliques (the "love handles") work to rotate the torso and also contract to compress the abdomen.

### **Start with a Proper Diet and Do Plenty of Cardio**

It's true, you can do hundreds of crunches every day and develop strong abs, but if you have lots of fat covering them up, you won't look any slimmer. Therefore, begin your abs training from the inside out, since the most important aspect of conditioning them is controlling your diet. Beautiful, well-defined abs are built in the kitchen, not in the gym. And since a healthy diet is a life-long habit that you must work on every day of your life, the least you can do now is to start reducing your portion size during meals. You'll have days when you can't resist that cheeseburger and fries, but you can eat more slowly, drink more water, and fill full more quickly, then hopefully you'll skip second servings, as well as dessert. Control your portions and the size of your stomach will actually shrink over time. In time, you'll find that you will become satisfied while eating less.

After the kitchen, the second step to abs training is in your feet, since the best way to slim down is to do plenty of cardiovascular exercise. You have a variety of fun activities to choose from including biking, running, brisk walking, swimming, aerobics, racquetball and so on, as long as it is an exercise of moderate intensity where you can get your heart rate up for at least 30 minutes. Try to do cardio about five times a week so that you can start burning the extra calories you've packed on as stored fat. Once the layer of subcutaneous fat comes off your stomach, your skin will become more taut and you can work on toning the abdominal muscles.

### **Exercises to Hit the Upper and Lower Abs**

Well developed abdominals are not only aesthetically pleasing they are important stabilizer muscles that keep your skeletal structure in check and act as a support system for most weight training exercises. For example, when performing heavy shoulder presses, a strong set of abs helps to protect the lower back from injury.

There are a number of variations of ab exercises you can do but the mainstay is the "crunch" which will target the entire group of muscles.

**Crunch** Lie flat on your back on the floor with your legs in front of you bent at the knees. While resting your hands on your chest, lift your shoulders and torso up in a curling movement without raising your back

from the floor. Keep the tension on the abs, breathe out as you crunch up, and return to the start position. Do them in a controlled fashion; two seconds to rise, two to lower. (And don't confuse a crunch with a traditional sit-up; in a crunch you do not lift your lower back off the floor or bench.)

**Cable crunches** – On your knees, grab a bar or rope attachment at the end of a cable, with your wrists against your head. Then crunch down, keeping the hips stationary but slightly flexed. Return and repeat. As with all ab exercises, work to failure on each set of reps.

**Barbell Twist** – Hold a light barbell on your shoulders and sit at the end of a flat bench with your feet firmly on the floor. Without moving your head and keeping your back straight, twist your torso to the right, then to the left by twisting at your waist only. This rotational exercise also works the obliques well.

**Oblique or Bicycle Crunch** – By adding a twist to crunch work, you can work the obliques nicely. To work your side obliques, lie flat on your back with your knees bent. With your left hand over your left ear, roll your upper body up to the right until your left elbow touches your right knee. Contract the muscles on the sides of your waist. Return to the start position. Switch to your right side and repeat.

**Leg Raises** – Lying flat on your back on a mat or an incline bench, keeping your hands relaxed at your sides. With knees bent, raise your legs six inches off the floor, and hold for a moment. Lower your legs and repeat.

**Hanging Leg Raises** – Using an overhand grip on a pull-up bar, and keeping your knees slightly bent, exhale and slowly lift your legs up. Make sure your lower back stays rounded. Pause a moment before slowly lowering your legs back to the start position. This exercise will effectively hit the lower abs if you contract your abs and lift your legs as high as you can — higher than hip level. Otherwise your hip flexors are doing all the work.

An **Ab Machine** will work the entire abdominal complex. The machine is designed to simulate a crunch, but you can add weight to increase the resistance.

The **Roman Chair** or **Hyperextension Stand**. Sit on the chair, cross your arms over your chest, and place your feet under the pads for support. Lean back until you are in a horizontal position. Crunch your shoulders forward, placing the stress on the abs, and return to an upright position.

No sit-ups on the list? That's right, because even when they are done properly, full sit-ups tend to put the workload on the hip flexors and not the stomach muscles. The key is to do exercises that mainly work the Rectus Abdominus, and for that, the simplest exercise is the crunch. A sample ab workout should include: 1-2 forward flexion exercises (crunch, etc.); 1-2 side flexion exercises (side bends, side crunches, etc.); and 1-2 rotational exercises (trunk rotations, standing twists, etc.). Work your abs at most three times per week, and leave them for last since you will indirectly be using them for all the other weight training exercises. If you do your abs first, you will tire them out and it will affect your entire workout.

### **Now Suck In Your Gut**

If you know of people who are naturally lean but who still have a round little pot belly, chances are they have weak Transverse Abdominus muscles. When you can't make it to the gym, you can still do exercises around the house or office to work the abs. Try this: Blow out all of your air and suck in your stomach, holding it for 15 to 30 seconds. It's that simple and you can easily be working on slimming your waistline during the day. You can also contract and flex your abs in between sets to improve muscle definition — bodybuilders do it all the time, and it works.

Once you begin to shrink your stomach through proper nutrition, and add regular cardiovascular and strength training workouts to your life, your shy abs will begin to show themselves off. As your total body fitness improves you can achieve your goal of getting a ripped six-pack, or just a good-looking flat stomach peaking out under a sexy midriff top.