[IMAGE]

Building the Perfect Abs

By Dr. Jeffrey Tucker

Young or old, fitness buff or bookworm, just about everyone would love it if their stomach looked a little flatter, leaner and more toned. Proper nutrition and exercise will help burn away the fat, but that's not enough; ab exercises target the underlying muscles, giving you the look you've always wanted. Here's a progressive ab routine that can't be beat.

It seems like every day someone asks me, "What exercises can I do for my stomach?" Some ask because they want to help tighten their core and help a current low back problem; others ask because they want to lose stomach fat and fit into their favorite pair of jeans; still others are looking to build "six-pack" abs and wow people at the beach. The truth is, doing high repetitions of abdominal exercises has a minimal effect on reducing fat around the waist. The muscles are not what make your stomach flatter; it's a sensible nutrition and exercise plan that helps you lose body fat. However, ab exercises are important because they help you build ab muscles, so when you get rid of the belly fat, those new muscles will be visible.

perfect abs - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark It's also important to understand that the rationale for abdominal training goes far beyond "looks." The increased strength and recruitment of the abdominal muscles will carry over into better posture and more body control, both in daily life and in sporting movements. And it's the little-known muscles that make the big ones stand out. Working the muscles you can't see -- the ones deep inside your core areas -- can be a difficult process, but target those areas and your whole body benefits. Not only will you look better, but you'll also have more strength and suffer fewer injuries.

Progressive Ab Routines to Challenge Yourself (and Your Abs)

If you are essentially a beginner when it comes to exercise, particularly abdominal exercises, start with the following beginner ab routine, which focuses on getting the small, deep-lying stabilizing muscles (such as the lower abdominals and deep spinal muscles) to work properly. Then progress to the intermediate ab routine, which includes body-weight exercises that concentrate on developing stability and/or strength endurance in certain postures and the mobilizer muscles. Once you've "mastered" both the beginner and

intermediate routines, you can progress to the strength-based advanced ab routine, which can be performed on the floor or Swiss ball and using bands, cables or medicine balls.

If you had to pick the most popular exercise at the gym, you'd probably choose the crunch. So, let's pick some other beginner ab moves and get started. Ab exercises are safer and more effective if performed slowly and strongly without jerking or bouncing. If nothing else, include three or four of the exercises in this article in each of your regular workouts.

Beginner Ab Routine

exercise ball - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark Perform the beginner routine at the end of your regular workout or as a stand-alone workout, 3-4 days a week. Start with six repetitions per exercise and build up to 15 reps each (except the plank - you can perform one set and increase your holding time, up to one minute). Complete the routine as a circuit, doing one set of each movement in succession and without resting. If that feels easy, try to perform the circuit a second time after a 90-second rest.

To locate your deepest abdominal muscle -- the transversus abdominis -- put your fingertips about 2 inches away from the belly button. Cough a few times. The muscle you feel contracting under your fingertips is called the transversus abdominis. Focus on keeping this muscle contracted while doing each of these exercises. Once you know how to contract your abdominal muscles, do the following ab exercises as a beginner program:

1. Single-Leg Abdominal Press: Lying on your back on a floor mat or a padded bench, touch your right palm to the right knee. Raise your right leg off the floor so your knee and hip are bent at 90-degree angles. Rest the right hand on top of your right knee. Push your hand forward while using your abdominal muscles to pull your knee toward your hand. Hold for three deep breaths and return to the start position.

Repeat this exercise using your left hand and left knee. Keep your arm straight and avoid bending more than 90 degrees at your hip.

2. Opposite Hand on Opposite Knee: Push your right hand against your left knee while pulling your knee toward your hand. You'll be pushing and pulling across the center of your body. Repeat this exercise using your other hand and leg. Hold for three deep breaths and return to the start position.

3. Hand on Outside of Knee: Raise your left leg off the floor so your knee and hip are bent at 90-degree angles. Place your left hand along the outside of your left knee. Use your hand to push your leg inward. At the same time, create resistance by pushing your knee away from the center. Keep the back flat. Repeat using your other hand and leg.

4. Opposite Hands on Opposite Knees: Place each hand on the opposite knee, toward the inside of each knee. Your arms will cross over each other. Push your hands against your knees and create resistance by pulling your knees in toward your hands. Hold and repeat.

5. Hands on Outside of Knees (right hand/right knee): Use your hands to push your legs in toward the center of your body. At the same time, create resistance by pushing your knees out. Hold and repeat.

6. Plank: Lie on your stomach. Raise yourself up so you're resting on your forearms and your knees. Keep your head and back in line and imagine your back as a tabletop. Align your shoulders directly above your elbows. Squeeze your core muscles. Create resistance by pressing your elbows and your knees toward one another. Neither should move from their positions on the floor. Hold for three deep breaths, then return to the start position and repeat.

Intermediate Ab Routine

exercise ball - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark Perform this routine three days a week at the end of your regular workout or as a stand-alone workout. Build up to 20 repetitions of each exercise in the order shown (except the side plank - perform two reps with holding times of 30 seconds per side). Complete the routine as a circuit, doing one set of each movement in succession and without resting. Once that feels easy, rest 60-90 seconds after doing one complete circuit; then do the circuit again.

1. Classic Curl: Hold a weight plate or medicine ball across your chest as you lie on your back on a stability ball. Spread your feet wide, with your neck, torso and thighs parallel to the floor, and crunch. Your goal is to gain strength to resist unwanted twists, so you should feel it throughout the abs.

2. Side Planks: These challenge your stability and work the muscles along the side of your body. Starting on your left side, raise yourself onto your left forearm. Tighten your core muscles to keep your shoulders, hips and knees in alignment. Align your left shoulder directly above your left elbow. Rest your right arm along the side of your body. Hold this position for three deep breaths before relaxing. Repeat this exercise on your right side.

3. Sprinter Sit-Up: Lie on your back with your legs straight and arms at your sides, keeping your elbows bent at 90 degrees. As you sit up, twist your upper body to the left and bring your left knee toward your right elbow while you swing your left arm back. Lower your body to the starting position, and repeat to your right. That's one repetition.

4. Straight-Leg Lifts: This exercise targets the lower abs. Lie on your back with your legs raised directly over your hips. Your knees should be slightly bent. Place your hands at your sides with the palms down. Use your lower abs to raise your hips off the floor and toward your rib cage, elevating your feet straight up to the ceiling. Hold, then return to the starting position.

Advanced Ab Routine

Before trying this routine, make sure you have been successful with the beginner and intermediate ab routines (meaning those exercises generally feel easy to you). Perform the advanced routine at the end of your regular workout or as a stand-alone workout, three days a week. Build up to 20 repetitions of each exercise in the order shown (except the elevated side plank - perform two sets with 30-second holds). Complete the routine as a circuit, doing one set of each movement in succession and with a 30-60 second rest between each exercise. Once that feels easy, rest 60-90 seconds and do the circuit again.

1. Elevated Side Plank: Same setup as you use for the side plank, but stack your feet on a bench. Don't allow your hips to sag.

2. Stability Ball Rollouts: This works the anterior core. You will definitely feel it in your abs. This can be tougher than it looks, so start out with the basic progressions. If your back is hurting during this exercise, you need to take a step back. Start with the stability ball very close to you and your hands up top. Keeping a straight line from knees to shoulders, start to roll the ball out. Roll out into a plank position with your elbows on the ball, maintaining the straight line from knees to shoulders. To come back, push off with your elbows and hands, being careful not to lead with your butt. End in the starting position.

stretching - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark *3. Wood Chop*: Set up sideways to a stack of weights (or use an exercise band) with your feet shoulder-width apart and the band handle on the highest cable pulley. Rotate on the ball of your foot as you pull the band down and across your body until the handle is just outside your far knee. Do all your reps, then switch sides and repeat.

4. Trunk "Lifts": Securely attach one end of a band to a stationary object near the floor. Begin with the hips and knees slightly bent. Stand to the side of the attachment and grasp the handle with both hands, with your trunk slightly rotated toward the band. Lift the band over your opposite shoulder with both hands, turning your trunk away from the attachment. Slowly return to the starting position.

5. Toe Touch: Use a medicine ball, lie on your back, and raise your legs so they're straight and perpendicular to the floor. Hold the ball above the top of your head with your arms straight. Without moving your legs or bending your elbows, simultaneously lift your arms and torso until the ball touches your toes. Lower yourself back to the starting position. That's one repetition.

6. Crunch With Medicine Ball: Lie on your back with your legs straight. Use both hands to hold a medicine ball above your head and barely off the floor. Simultaneously raise your torso and bend your right knee toward your chest as you bring the ball over your knee and toward your foot. Reverse the movement and repeat, this time bending your left knee. That's one repetition.

Make sure to supplement your abdominal routine with an exercise program that includes movements like squats, cleaning and pressing, bench pressing, dead-lifting and so forth, and you'll work your trunk muscles even more. And of course, talk to your doctor before beginning any exercise program if you have an existing health condition that limits movement, or if you haven't really exercised before (or if it's been a long time). You want to make sure you're doing these exercises correctly, so ask your doctor to explain the precise movement if you're not absolutely sure. Then get started on your perfect abs one repetition at a time! Enjoy the new look you will achieve after 8-10 weeks by being consistent with the above routines. anatomy - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark

Ab Anatomy 101

The abs consist of the smaller **transversus abdominis muscle**, a flat, triangular muscle layered below the internal oblique muscles. It is the stability muscle and has a tremendous effect on body posture. The **internal obliques** are a pair of muscles residing on each side of the torso; they are involved in rotation. The **external obliques** are also located on either side of the torso, on top of the internal obliques. Like the internal obliques, the external obliques are involved in, among other things, rotation and lateral bending of the spine. The **rectus abdominus** muscles, long, lean muscles that run vertically up the center of the abdomen, are the most superficial of the abdominal muscles and are responsible for the six-pack ab look in very lean and fit people. Keep in mind that if you do too many repetitions of just abdominal exercises, you

will probably *increase* the muscle bulk around your waist and actually increase your girth.

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