

[IMAGE]

5 Awesome Ab Exercises to Tone and Tighten Your Core

By Editorial Staff

You can flaunt your toned arms and legs, defined back and shoulders, and tight chest muscles all day long, but if your abdominal area is flabby, pudgy or otherwise unfit, you're not going to impress anyone – first of all yourself. That's because a toned, tightened, attractive core is just that – the core of what makes people say, "Wow, you're really in great shape!" And we're not even talking about the other benefits of a fit core, including better balance, less chance of experiencing back pain, etc. Here are five great exercises to make your core a talking point – and for all the *right* reasons – this summer and all year round:

1. *Plank Jack*: Position yourself in a plank position (push-up position except supporting your weight with your forearms, not your hands). Make sure your body is straight; your back should not be rounded and your buttocks should not be raised above the rest of your body. Also make sure to position your elbows even with your shoulders; any farther out in front of you and you'll put excessive pressure on your shoulders.

With your abs tightened, maintain this position for 30 seconds to 1 minute. While doing so, alternate bringing the knee of one leg up toward the same-side elbow, then the other. Do as many as you can during the time limit. Don't worry about speed; focus on slow movement with contraction of your entire core / abdominal area.

2. *Side Curl*: This exercise starts in a side-plank position, which means you are on one side, supporting your weight with your forearm / elbow, one foot on top of the other, body straight (feet in line with hips, in line with head / neck). Keep your core tight the entire time. Do 10-12 repetitions of the following: Bring the non-supporting elbow in toward your chest as you "curl" your body inward toward the floor, then return to the starting (side) position. After completing all reps, switch sides and repeat on the opposite side. Again, go slow, concentrating on contracting your abdominal area. Balance is key.
3. *Bicycle Crunch*: To do this two-part exercise, lie on a padded surface on the floor, knees raised, feet on floor, hands on chest or abs. Step 1: Crunch forward, raising your head / shoulders off the floor approximately 30 degrees. Focus on contracting your core with each repetition, not straining your head / neck or rounding your shoulders. Don't tuck your chin into your chest; stare straight ahead. Step 2.

After 10-15 crunches, maintain the upward crunch position, but lift your feet slightly off the floor, knees still bent, and do as many "bicycles" (moving your legs rapidly as if you're pedaling a bike) as possible to failure.

4. *Leg / Knee Lifts:* Lie on a padded surface on the floor, legs straight, hands at sides or at chest / ab level. Stare straight ahead and keep your head, neck and shoulders on the floor as you alternate raising both legs straight up (knees locked) as high as possible (without lifting your buttocks / lower back off the floor) and returning to the floor; and then bending both knees toward your chest, again without compromising your back, and returning both legs to the floor. Do anywhere from 15-30 total repetitions to start, depending on ability. Remember, keep the abdominals / core tight throughout and concentrate on feeling the ab muscles contract with each movement.
5. *Ab Hold:* Sit on the edge of a chair with your hands on either side of your body, facing you (your fingers should grab the edge of the chair so they face your knees). Tighten your abs as you raise your feet – and buttocks – several inches off the floor / chair. Maintain this "crunch" position for 5-10 seconds, lower your body back to the chair / floor, and repeat. Do 10-15 or as many as possible to start. Make sure not to lean forward, round your shoulders or use your arms for anything except support; think core tightening only.

Remember, if your neck, shoulders or back hurt during any of these exercises, you're not doing them right. Abdominal training is all about focusing on the midsection and doing small, deliberate movements. Be strict in your positioning and execution; otherwise you may strain something – or end up not working your abs at all. Go slow, build up to more repetitions / longer exercise times, and mix things up to keep your abdominal muscles "guessing." Trust us, you'll be glad to feel the burn when you see the results!

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