

How to Get Awesome Abs

Crunch, crunch, crunching away with no results? Believe it or not, cardio and diet play a more important role in scoring the elusive ab. I have a confession: I do not have flat abs. I know how to get flat abs, and I've certainly had them in the past – but my latest nightly indulgence of red wine and cheese dip coupled with a knee injury has made the whole process difficult. But they will be back. Soon.

Notice I didn't mention crunches. Hmmmmm....

That's because CRUNCHES ALONE WILL NOT GIVE YOU FLAT ABS. I apologize for shouting, but it is unbelievable how many people think this is true. Unless you are seventeen or blessed with extremely low body fat, you need to spend less time overall on abdominal exercises and focus more on lowering total body fat through aerobic exercise and diet.

Consistent cardio exercise

“I don't know why everyone slams cardio?? the heart is a muscle and the only way to strengthen a muscle is to make it expand and contract, to strain it. You cant do heart curls!” – beanbomb

Consistency is key. Going for a leisurely stroll once or twice a week is better than doing nothing, but it probably won't help you lose weight. You have to make cardio exercise a habit, and that means 4 or more days per week, for at least 30 minutes per session. Any activity that gets your heart pumping in your target heart weight zone is acceptable. If you love the outdoors, try running, cycling, speed-walking or hiking. If you like to workout at the gym, most machines are great – try the elliptical, stationary bike, rowing machine, or treadmill on an incline. You can even exercise at home with fitness DVDs – Collage Video has a great selection.

Tips to get through tough cardio sessions

Start small – it can be hard to get started if you're primarily inactive, or have taken a long hiatus from working out. Don't beat yourself up if you're at this point! Try about 10-20 minutes per cardio session, and work your way up to 30 minutes. It won't be long before you're completing 40- to 60-minute cardio sessions most days of the week.

Switch it up – some days I will do 30 minutes on the stationary bike, and 30 minutes speed walking on an incline, while other days I will do 45 steady minutes on the elliptical.

Alternate high intensity exercise (either high speed or heavy resistance) with recovery periods – this is one of the best tips and has been proven to burn the most fat.

Make a good play list on your mp3 player – I've said this many times and it never gets old. Certain songs just pump me up, and I'm sure you have your list as well, whether they are shake-your-booty dance numbers, or angry metal jams, they get you moving!

Take a class – there is something to be said about communal exercise. Friends keep you motivated and can even boost your confidence!

Healthy, Nutritional Meals

“The tacos sound easy and healthy!” — Sarah

Did you ever think you could flatten your abs by eating more? The best flat belly diet is to eat five to six mini-meals throughout the day. These smaller meals, eaten every three hours, boost metabolism and help keep you satiated longer. Always plan your meals ahead of time and include a fiber-rich carb and lean protein with every mini-meal. Also, make sure to plan and pack all of your meals the night before, so you're not tempted to visit the vending machine or convenience store for something sugary and fattening!

Here are some ideas to get you started:

- Oatmeal (with or without additional protein power)
- Cold cereal with skim or soy milk
- Protein shakes or smoothies (pre-made or make your own)
- Scrambled egg whites or egg substitute on whole-wheat toast
- Hummus with whole-grain crackers
- Granola or protein bar
- Tuna made with low-fat mayonnaise on whole-grain crackers or whole-grain bread
- Lean deli meats (turkey, chicken, ham) on whole-grain bread with mustard
- Peanut butter and jelly on reduced-sodium rice cake
- Light cheese on whole-grain crackers (try Laughing Cow)

spreadable cheese)

Salad with black beans and salsa vinaigrette (mix salsa and red wine vinegar)

Half avocado and half cucumber, tossed with lemon juice and 1 tsp extra-virgin olive oil

Yogurt or cottage cheese

Apple or banana with peanut butter

BLT made with Morningstar Bacon substitute, lettuce, tomato, and light mayonnaise

Morningstar Recipe Grillers (ground beef substitute) sautéed with diced tomatoes

6-piece sushi meal with miso soup

2 soft tacos made with whole-wheat or corn tortillas, shredded chicken or black beans, lettuce, tomatoes, salsa and fat-free shredded cheese

Lentil, minestrone, or homemade cabbage soup with whole-grain toast

Grilled/baked chicken breast or fish with steamed vegetables or salad

Finally, the crunches

“I agree, abs are made in the kitchen not the gym, but you still need to choose the correct exercises.” – Michael

Abdominals are mostly endurance muscles, so you shouldn't train to increase in size as you would a bicep or quadriceps muscle. Perform only 15-20 repetitions of each exercise – and don't worry if you don't see results right away. It takes a consistent program of cardio, healthy eating, and ab exercises to get a flat midsection!

A research study commissioned by American Council on Exercise found the following ab exercises to be most effective:

Bicycle Maneuver

Lie on the floor with your lower back pressed to the ground and place your hands behind your head. Bring your knees to a 45-degree angle and slowly “pedal” your legs in a bicycle motion, bringing your left elbow to your right knee, then your right elbow to your left knee.

Captain's Chair

Grip the hand holds and place your elbows on the padded arm rest. Hold your body up, with legs dangling below. Slowly lift your knees in toward your chest with a controlled motion:

Stability Ball Crunch

Sit on a stability ball with your feet flat on the floor. Walk your legs out until they are parallel to the floor, and the small of your back is resting firmly against the ball. Cross your arms over your chest, contract your abdominals and raise your torso no more than 45 degrees. To challenge your obliques, make the exercise less stable by moving your feet closer together.

Reverse Crunch

Lie on the floor with your lower back pressed on the ground and place your hands behind your head or extended at your sides – whichever feels most comfortable. Cross your feet at the ankles and lift your legs off the ground, forming a 90-degree angle. Press your lower back into the floor as you contract your abdominals and tilt your hips upward, as if you're trying to place your feet flat on the ceiling.

Finally, it's important to remember that one crunch does not fit all. If you find something you like, and stick with it, you're bound to see the results you want!