

Abdominals (End of Summer Shape-Up Wrap Up)

By Lisa Schilling RN

The abdominal muscle group is used for most daily functions. Balanced core strength will reduce injury and increase your coordination. The abdominal area needs to be in balance with your back. Tight abdominals hold the intestines and internal organs in place. Weak muscles allow the organs to fall forward and protrude out. Most abdominal muscles are hidden under a layer of fat. Even the tightest muscle—six pack abs—will never be seen if that layer of fat is not reduced through weight loss. Your body shape and genetic makeup will determine if you store excess fat in this area. Because of the dangers that fat stored around organs and in the abdominal area pose, a routine of exercise and dietary changes are needed to improve your risk factors.

Exercise #1) Crunches (Basic) Lie on your back with knees bent or on a chair. Place hands gently behind head or straight up in the air. Pick a spot on the ceiling and keep your eyes there. Raise shoulders off the ground by contracting the abdominal muscles. Keep your chin a fists distance from your chest. Keep elbows soft and pause as you feel the abdominal area tighten. Keep low back pressed into the floor and keep breathing. Slowly lower back to starting position. Inhale during extension (when releasing crunch or laying back) and exhale during contraction (when crunching or bending up).

Exercise #2) 3 and 1 Slow Crunch- Place hands gently behind head as above or straight up in the air. Raise shoulders off the ground by contracting the abdominal muscles. Pause three times on the way up to increase the abdominal tightening. Keep your chin a fists distance from your chest and elbows soft. Pause and hold five seconds in the highest position using only the abdominals. Keep low back pressed into the floor and maintain proper breathing. Slowly lower back to starting position in one count.

Exercise #3) Legs Up Crunch- Adjust so that your back is flat on the floor and in a comfortable position. Elevate bent legs in the air. Hands are behind the neck with elbows out. Raise shoulders off the ground by contracting the abdominal muscles. Keep elbows soft and open (do not bring elbows in). Keep low back pressed into the floor. Slowly lower shoulders to starting position legs remain elevated throughout. Variation: Alternate raising each leg and tapping down each leg (increases difficulty).

Exercise #4) Side Crunch (Oblique Twist). Lie on your right side with knees bent. Twist upper body so face and shoulders face up. Lift shoulders off the floor by contracting the abdominal muscles. Slowly return to starting position.

Exercise #5) Double Knee Crunch- Lay on your back with knees bent. Bring knees and elbows together by contracting abdominal muscles. Return to start.

Exercise #6) Bicycle Crunch- Lie on your back with knees bent and legs up. With legs still elevated, straighten right leg and bring left knee closer. Take right elbow toward the left knee. Switch legs by extending the left and bring right knee close. Take left elbow toward the right knee. Keep low back pressed into the floor. Continue to repeat series.

You don't have to lay on the floor to increase abdominal strength or flatten you mid-section. The key is isolating the core muscles and tensing and releasing them. The following exercises can be done by all fitness levels and in most settings. Focus on using the abdominal muscles to produce the movement.

Chair Alternative #1- Sit on edge of chair. Lean back with legs bent in front of you. Grasp the corners of the chair with both hands. Contract the abdominal muscle to bring knees up. Upper back may be pressed into the chair if necessary. Pause and feel the abdominal tightening. Slowly lower back to the starting position.

Chair Alternative #2-As #1, but instead of just raising knees you kick forward slowly—keeping tension in the abdominals and then return back to start.

Chair Alternative #3-As #1, but instead of just raising knees you kick forward slowly to the right with both legs extended. Keeping tension in the abdominals, return back to start. Then kick forward slowly to the left with both legs extended. Keep tension in the abdominals and return back to start.

Chair Alternative #4-Cross arms across chest. As #1, but instead of just raising knees straight up, you bring each knee to the opposite elbow. Then return back to the start. Repeat alternating each knee—keeping tension in the abdominals.

Multiple variations of abdominal crunches can be done. Mixing up your routine can help you to avoid adaptation to the exercise. Consider balancing on a fitness ball to add greater challenge. I hope you have enjoyed this 6- Week, End of Summer Shape Up.

