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"Abs to Die For!"

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Introduction to Healthy Abs for Men and Women

This guide presents basic information about healthy abdominal muscles, referred to throughout as “abs,” for men and women. It seeks to dispel hype while focusing on reality.

For instance, will the latest exercise gadget on early morning television cable channels, also referred to as infomercials, really bring you “ape abs” or other such nonsense in a week, if you use it mega-times a day? Seriously doubtful.

Why? Mainly because of fat. If a person carrying a lot of extra weight does dozens or even hundreds of exercises a day with the latest gadget, for example, crunches, he or she may develop strong abs. However, a lot of fat will still be hiding them, because nearly half the body fat is lying right under the skin, while the rest is within the muscles themselves. And those exercises and gadgets will not eliminate this unwanted fat. Not all by themselves, that is.

The reality is that firming-up abs is the result of the production of muscle contractions by the stimulation of the nerves that control the muscle fibers. The “ape abs” or increased muscle tissue that result, along with a low enough body-fat percentage, allows people to see some definition and shape of the muscles. This takes the place of the former flabby areas.

In other words, you cannot grab a gadget and spot-reduce or focus only on one area like the abs (at least without liposuction, that is). Since the entire body works together like a huge organ, when you combine a regular scheduled health and fitness program, your body will naturally shed the extra weight and fat all over- including the ab area - while it maintains a low enough body-fat percentage. We'll discuss more of this in a basic program here; a combination of aerobic exercises with strength training and healthy eating habits.

This guide will present you with complete program that covers ab basics, ab exercises with routines for all levels – from beginners to advanced, along with sections focused on trainer tips, ab resources for more information and a Self-Help Guide to help with Getting and Staying Motivated. The common goal is to help you learn more about healthy abs for men and women.

Note that the contents here are not presented from a medical practitioner, and that any and all health care planning should be made under the guidance of your own medical and health practitioners. The content within only presents an overview of ab research for educational purposes and does not replace medical advice from a professional physician.

Ab Basics

When you workout the bodies' larger muscle groups, you increase your muscle mass and boost your metabolism. The large muscles to focus on - and in this recommended order - are front and back of thighs, buttocks, back, chest, triceps, biceps, calves, hips, forearms, shoulders and abs.

The reason why ab work is suggested at the end of your daily workout is because first of all, this muscle group is used when working the other muscle groups in one way or another anyway. And second, probably more important, is the fact that the abs help keep your form stabilized. If your workout started with the abs at the beginning and they grew tired, what would happen to the rest of your workout? It wouldn't be as effective. So professional fitness trainers recommend working down; exercising first the largest on down to the smallest muscle groups. So let's take a quick peek inside the basic muscle groups.

Lower Areas: Buttocks, Hips, Legs (Thighs, Calves)

In a nutshell, the lower area refers to the rear pelvic region or two rounded areas on the torso (behind) that are posterior to the hips and formed by the gluteal muscles and other supporting tissues, organs, structures. Hip, thigh and calve muscles are worked in with this group.

Middle Areas: Stomach or Mid-Section or Abs

This muscle group includes four muscles that make up your abdominals: the rectus abdominis, the internal and external obliques, and the transverse abdominis sides (under the obliques). Your rectus abdominis forms the "six-pack," the front of your abs that vertically extends from your sternum to your pelvic bone. Hint: for lots of people—yes, even those who do daily crunches—there is a "weak spot" under their navels, at the bottom of their rectus abdominis. That's where most note the "battle of the bulge."

Upper Areas: Upper Torso or Body, Chest, Arms

This group contains the trapezius and rhomboids. The trapezius muscle, shaped like a triangle, extends from the middle of your back up, covering the shoulder blades and on to your neck. They help with shoulder blade and backward head movements. Working on the trapezius works on your shoulders, strengthening the back and neck against positional pain (like from lying down too long, sitting in the same place too long, etc.) The rhomboids, smaller muscles in the mid-back that help move the shoulder blades, reach upwards, just under the neck's base. Working them helps with good posture.

Shoulder Muscle Group

This group of muscles includes the deltoids and rotators. The deltoids, thick triangular muscles covering shoulder joints, can be divided up into three areas; the anterior or front, lateral or side, and posterior or rear. Working these areas will help with shoulder range-of-motion, function and defined appearance or shape. The rotators or rotator cuffs are a group of muscles under the shoulder that position the arm. Working them draws them in, under the arm.

Chest Muscle Group

This group contains the pectorals or pecs, four flat muscles, two on each side chest-front. They assist with upper arm and shoulder movements. While big fan-

shaped pectoralis major muscles atop the lower pecs pull the arms across the chest, lower pectoralis minor muscles press the shoulders down. Working this muscle group in men helps increase and define or sculpt the chest. In women, working these helps provide support and lift for the bust.

Arm Muscles

This group includes the biceps, triceps and forearm muscles. Biceps are large muscles in the upper arm that contract to bend the elbows. Workouts can help define and give shape to biceps. Triceps, the large muscles that travel along the back of the upper arm, work opposite the biceps to straighten out the elbow. Working these can help eliminate excess downward “flab” or loose skin that shows when an arm is extended outwards. And forearm muscles, between the wrist and the elbow, help with multiple wrist hand and finger movements. Working them is said to help with wrist issues and susceptibilities like Carpal Tunnel Syndrome.

Ab Exercises

For a good workout that focuses on the rectus abdominis, which flexes the spine, focus on sit-ups and crunches.

To continue on with internal and external obliques at the sides of the rectus abdominis, incorporate some twists at the waist (or with crunches) or sideways bends at the spine (or with dumbbells) to exercise the internal and external obliques, also known as “nature’s girdle.” Be careful of using “jerky” motions, though, especially with past back injuries. Use easy, smooth repetitions instead.

Continue on to YOUR sides or the transversus abdominis, below the obliques, also known as the “lower abs.” Basic exercises that are good for this area are raising the legs, instead of the upper body.

Water Workout

Here is a 9-minute workout for indoor or outdoor pools, for a little variety with your ab exercises. This method offers a lot of benefits over floor and machine workout. You get a high-intensity level, muscle-shaping, strength-building fitness regime that burns lots of calories. And the best part is, water is very gentle on your moving parts yet creates a natural resistance over 700 times greater than air.

The exercises both tone and strengthen your major muscle groups. And they sync both the upper and lower body for maximum weight shedding.

Pool Rules

- Workout in water that is navel- to chest-deep.
- When possible, wear water shoes.
- To increase resistance and add more intensity to your exercises, use aqua equipment.
- Keep your posture / form as you increasing your speed so that resistance is intensified.
- For beginners, do your upper- and lower-body moves separately.

3-Minute Scoop-Frog Moves

Focus on your upper-body movements next by placing your hands together in a scoop at the water's surface. Scoop down. Then scoop back up without breaking the surface. Repeat. As you do each one, alternate your movement so that you move first left, then right. This exercise works your obliques. Use water gloves or paddles for increased resistance work.

Then focus on your lower-body movements by standing in the water with your legs wide apart. Then leap like a frog, having your knees breach the surface, then go back down, settling briefly on the pool floor. Repeat.

3-Minute Sour Grapes

Focus on your lower-body movements by standing with your legs wide apart. Then begin lifting one knee at a time in front of you, stomping or pumping your legs one at a time, alternately left and right, like you would do it you were stomping grapes. Note: Make sure to reach the pool bottom each time. This movement helps your rear and thighs.

Focus on your upper-body movements by spreading your arms out wide in front of you. Bend them a little so there's not too much stress on the elbow joints. Then push one arm down hard to your hips and bring it back up. Switch arms and push the other one down, then bring it back up. Keep alternating and doing repetitions. This movement works your upper back, the back and front of your arms and your shoulders. For greater intensity, wear water gloves.

3-Minute Ski Master

Focus on your upper-body movements by reaching and extend your arms out to the sides at the water's surface. Press your shoulders back and down, with your elbows slightly bent (don't want to lock them and put undo stress on the joints). Then lower your arms down to your sides, and raise them back up to the surface. This movement works your shoulders and back.

Focus on your lower-body movements by stepping into the lunge position; placing one leg behind the other – don't lock knees. Then flex your knees, hop and switch legs, like when you're skiing. This movement aids you rear and your legs.

Notes: Increase resistance with any of the exercises above by using water paddles,

water gloves or aquatic hand buoys. And rest upper body as needed during exercises.

Results: If you do each exercise for 3 minutes, then jog for 30 seconds between exercises, these water workout exercises for the abs should burn about 100 calories in just 10 minutes. Of course repetitions burn even more calories. **Goal:** Do a water workout two or three times a week, if possible.

Power Pilates

Pilates are the rave with a lot of people. The Pilates method is used worldwide by all types of people from fitness friends and spa seekers, to performing artists and professional athletes. Pilates not only help you get in shape physically, by conditioning the body without hurting it, they help get it in shape mentally and emotionally. Let's take a look.

Started by gymnast Joseph H. Pilates (sounds like: puh-lah-teez) over 75 years ago, the Pilates method is made up of a series of exercises that focus on your abdominal muscles, mainly the deepest layer of muscles in your abdomen. History has it that Joseph Pilates developed the Pilates method as rehabilitation for bed-bound patients during World War I at an English hospital when he was a nurse.

He initially attached springs to the patients' mattresses so that they could use them in strength training, pull and push against them for resistance. The improved method traveled with its creator to New York, when Pilates moved in the 1920s. And soon, dancers from all over were even looking Pilates up for help. In fact, well-knowns like choreographer George Balanchine and dancer, teacher, and choreographer Martha Graham and were part of the Pilates methods' early clientele.

However, as Joseph Pilates outreach and desire to help others even more grew, he developed the series of exercises for workouts on mats that wouldn't require any other equipment or gadgets (or mattress springs) so that everyone could enjoy improved bodies, physically and mentally. And top athletes like members of the NFL's San Francisco 49ers, and Hollywood stars like Sharon Stone, Julia Roberts, Madonna, hit the mats to do their Pilates.

The Pilates method combines these exercises with breathing focus and mental concentration exercises, as well. And the result is a combined mind / body fitness program that focuses on developing your body to its top potential or peak performance level, while helping you reach your best mentally and emotionally at the same time.

The exercises boast multiple benefits. They help to sculpt a flatter stomach area. They help strengthen the abdominal muscles that in turn improve your coordination and balance. And they help your movement with other physical activities across the board as well as sharpen your emotional and mental state, resulting in improved balance and calmness.

Pilates also help other areas of the body. They stretch your entire frame, strengthening and improving your posture. Results reported by those active with the Pilates method show that these exercises help in the sculpting of long and lean toned muscles like those of a dancer. As a matter of fact, regardless of who you are; fitness fiend, Joe athlete or newbie at weightloss, Pilates are reported to be for nearly everyone; young and old, fit or not.

The key ingredient or secret of success of Pilates is not in the exercises themselves, as you'll run across crunches and other common workout components. Surprisingly enough, the key focuses on your **abdomen**, the central core of your body.

AB Workout Time

For Pilates to fit into your fitness training, check out the following resources:

Pilates Workout for Dummies (2001), Michelle Dozois, DVD, Anchor Bay Entertainment.

Pilates Complete For Weight Loss; DVD, Bodywisdom Media, Inc., Jan. 2004.

Winsor Pilates Workout Kit w/DVD As Seen On TV, Other products by Guthy Renker.

For more, visit Amazon.com and search, "Pilates."

Routines for All Levels

Lower Ab Crunches

Lying horizontally, with your back on the floor, raise legs, bending knees, with lower legs folded. With your hands at your sides, palms facing downward, press your lower back to the floor.

Breathe out while you lift your buttocks or backside along with your hips a little. Crunch up while pushing your lower back to the floor and squeezing your lower stomach section tight. Hold.

Then gently bring your buttocks or backside along with your hips back down to the floor. Repeat.

Results: You may feel a tingling or other intense perception or condition in your lower stomach and upper pelvis regions.

Floor Crunches

Lying horizontally, with your back on the floor, bend legs with feet flat, pushing lower back to the floor. With your hands together behind your neck, elbows back, crunch up a little. While breathing out as you crunch, lift your head and shoulders, pushing your lower back to the floor. And squeeze your stomach tight. Hold.

Gently bring your head and shoulders back down to the floor. Repeat. Results: You may feel a tingling or other intense perception or condition in your upper stomach and midsection regions.

Side Crunches

Lying horizontally, with your back on the floor, bend your knees and move your legs over to one side. With your lower body twisted to its side, your upper body stays horizontal and straight on the ground.

Place your hands by the sides of your head, elbows back. Crunch up a little while pushing your lower back to the ground. Lift your head and shoulders. And squeeze your side, at your waist.

Then gently bring your head and shoulders back down to the floor. Repeat. Then switch sides and repeat.

Variations

One Leg Up – Try doing sets of crunches with your legs off the floor to help tone the upper portion of your ab muscles. Begin by lying horizontally, with your back on the floor. Prop your legs up on a chair or couch cushion.

Then slow and steady, curl up. Lift your head, shoulders and upper back from the floor. Hold. Then gently ease them back down. Repeat. Goal: Do 12 repetitions, two to three times a week.

Reverse Crunches – With arms at your side, lie on the floor. Lift your feet off the floor. Encircle yourself - knees and legs at 90-degree angle. Pull your abdominals, pressing your back to the floor. And lift your hips approximately 3 inches from the floor. Hold. Then lower. Repeat. Goal: do 12 repetitions, two or three times a week to tighten stomach.

Crossover Crunches -

Begin by lying horizontally, with your back on the floor. Bend your knees, keeping your feet flat on the floor. With your hands behind your head, elbows pointing out, move your right ankle onto your left knee.

Raise your head and upper back off the floor. Twist. Then reach out with your left shoulder towards your right knee. Hold.

Gently and slowly lower. Goal: Do 12 repetitions. Repeat on other side. Do two or three times a week to work the muscles that define your obliques or waistline.

16 Minute Rush

Need to drop some pounds in a hurry? Here is a 16-minute, power-packed cardio-sculpt circuit that combines resistance and aerobic moves. If you're looking for maximum results in minimum time, this is it.

To begin, warm up by doing the entire circuit once - - slowly. Do each of the following exercises for 30 seconds, resting for 16-seconds in between. After the first set, speed up your pace and repeat.

Repeat the entire program 3 days a week. And be sure to rest a day in between each time.

Jumping Jack Jumps

The goal of this exercise is to increase the heart rate and tone the abs. With your arms at your sides and feet flat on floor (about hip-width apart), sit atop an inflated exercise ball. Stay seated and bounce / jump with your feet out to the sides, bringing your arms up and out in a V (like a jumping jack). Bounce again. Return arms and legs to start position. Repeat.

Leg Balance

The goal of this exercise is to strengthen the back and tone the abs and legs. Hold a 5- to 8-lb dumbbell in each hand while balancing on your right leg. Your left leg, torso, and head should be parallel to floor; your arms down straight at your sides. Pull dumbbells toward your chest while squeezing your shoulder blades together, with elbows remaining close to the body and the back remaining flat. Lower slowly. Repeat for 15 seconds. Then repeat balancing on left leg.

Curl Squats

The focus of this exercise is to sculpt the legs, rear and biceps. With feet hip-width apart, stand holding 3- to 5-lb dumbbells at your sides. Bend your knees and, keeping knees behind your toes, squat down until your thighs about parallel the floor. Return to a standing position, curling dumbbells toward your shoulders. Meanwhile, contract your glutes, lifting and lowering your left leg behind you. Return to squat. Continue, alternating legs.

Squat Walks

The goal of this exercise is to increase the heart rate and firm the glutes and legs. With your feet shoulder-width apart, loop an exercise band tight around both ankles. Then keeping knees behind toes, squat down until your thighs are nearly parallel to floor. Hold. Take 8 steps to the right, maintaining tension in the band. Stand, squat, then walk left. Alternate sides.

Alternative Push-Ups

The goal of this exercise is to strengthen the chest and tone the triceps and shoulders. With your body in a straight line from head to knees, kneel on floor you're your hands directly underneath your shoulders. Bend your elbows out to your sides. And lower your torso slowly to the floor. Hold. Then press back up to the start position. For advanced workouts: do push-ups on your toes instead of your knees.

Stair Tapping

The goal of this exercise is to increase the heart rate and sculpt the rear and legs. Stand in front of a staircase. Place your right foot on first step. With hands on your hips or arms reaching out in front of you for balance, bend the right leg slightly and lift your left leg up. Tap your toes on the step. Then lower your left leg and tap your toes on the floor. Repeat 5 times – quickly. Switch legs and continue. Alternating legs during reps.

Hop Switches

The goal of this exercise is to increase the heart rate and tone the shoulders and abs. Begin in a full push-up position with hands directly under the shoulders. Bend your right leg forward toward your chest. Extend your left leg straight behind you. With your back and neck in a line and your abdominals tight, hop and alternate legs, bringing your left foot forward, sending your right leg back - - all the while without moving your hands. Hold. Switch again.

Low Sweeps

The goal of this exercise is to increase heart rate and sculpt the rear and legs. With arms slightly right, stand with your weight on right foot, left foot behind your right leg. Hop left a few feet. Swing your arms and right leg swing left. Bend at your hips and left knee. And go into a crouched position. Alternate jumping from side to side. Remain as low as possible.

TV Workout – For the couch potato!

6 Commercial Breaks

You probably already know that each hour-long television show has about 6 commercial breaks that last 3 minutes each. But do you put those to use? Well now you can. PLUS while you're working out during break, you won't be snacking. Now that's a win-win!

Do 12 repetitions of each exercise below. And include the aerobic components. These are good for all fitness levels.

Commercial Break 1

Side Crunches to work on your obliques. With your legs together, lie on a couch on your left side. Bend your knees. With your right hand behind your head, your elbow pointing toward the ceiling, bring your left arm across your waist. Contract the oblique muscles on your right side. Then lift your shoulder off the couch. Bring your rib cage toward your hip. Hold. Then lower slowly. Repeat. Then switch sides. Note: use a mat or the floor if your couch is not firm enough).

Aerobics Time: Do crossover punches until the show returns: stand, twist from your waist, and alternately punch your fists crosswise from your body.

Commercial Break 2

Lounge Chair Pushups to work on the back of the arms and the chest. Kneel on the floor about 2 feet away from your lounge chair and face it. Place your hands about shoulder-width apart on a cushion edge and cross your ankles. Bend your arms. And lower your upper body slowly until your chest touches the chair. Hold. Then press yourself up again.

Aerobics Time: Do jumping jacks until the show comes back on.

Commercial Break 3

Armchair Dips to work the back of arms. Sit on the edge of your couch or chair. Place your hands on the edge, one on each side of you. Slide your feet out so that your rear is off the chair and bend your knees (90-degree angles). Bend your elbows, pointing them behind you, and lower yourself (as far as you can and still be comfortable.) Hold. Then press up again slowly.

Aerobics Time: Circle your fists in the air like you're imitating a person who's boxing a punching bag until it's show time.

Commercial Break 4

Armchair Stands to work the rear and front of your thighs. Sit on the edge of your couch or chair. With your feet about shoulder-width apart, and without using your arms, push the floor with your feet and rise up, tightening your buttocks' muscles as you stand. Tighten your abdominals and straighten your back. Hold. Then lower yourself slowly. Before touching the chair, stand up again. Repeat.

Aerobics Time: Walk or jog in place or up and down stairs until it's show time.

Commercial Break 5

Scissors for work on the inner and outer thighs. With your hands under your rear, palms side down, and your legs straight up in the air, lie on your back on your couch (or the carpet). With your knees slightly bent, spread your legs as far apart as is comfortable, slowly. Hold. Then gradually return to starting position. Bring your legs together, resisting while you press them inwards.

Aerobics Time: Do side slides: as quickly as you can, step your right foot out to the side. Then slide your left foot to meet it. Repeat in the opposite direction.

Commercial Break 6

Leg-up Couch Crunches for work on the abdominals. With your hands behind your head, lie on your back on the couch (or carpet). Bend your knees slightly, your feet up on one end. Press your lower back into the couch. Then raise your head, shoulders and upper back slowly off the couch. Hold. Then lower slowly. Use the floor if your couch is not firm enough.

Aerobics Time: Do knee lifts: Stand. Alternate bringing your right elbow down to meet your left knee, then your left elbow down to meet your right knee. Repeat until it's show time.

Trainer Tips

When working with your abs, remember:

- Always do stretches and light warm up activities before your workout. And do cooling down activities afterwards and stretches.
- Press your lower back into the floor or workout bench. And if you are not at an advanced performance level with pretty good lower back and abdominal strength, do not include exercises that have instructions to arch up your back. Instead, it's recommended that you bend your knees, and keep them closer to your body
- Exhale while you crunch up.
- Work your lower abdominals first, they are generally more difficult and wear you out faster.
- With ab exercises, when placing your hands under your neck for crunches, remember to keep your elbows back. Crunch up with your shoulders. When elbows point upwards, they can pull the neck, resulting in a stiffness or pain.
- A goal of three ab workout sessions per week is good. Any more is considered over-training. Muscles need time to develop, as muscle growth actually increase muscle tone. So in between workouts, get at least one to two complete days of rest from ab exercises between workouts.
- Caution when doing lots of repetitions. Focus on sets, instead. For example, instead of aiming for dozens of crunches per workout, hold each rep for a count of 4. And incorporate a system of using 12 sets of reps per workout, mixing sets with other rep sets (like a set of side crunches, a set of floor crunches, a set of lower ab crunches - -then back to another set of side crunches, a set of floor crunches, a set of lower ab crunches, etc.)
- Focus on the positive – especially with your own internal self-talk. Be your own best friend and compliment yourself on your efforts and good work.
- Don't set your own self up for failure – i.e. avoid tempting yourself by keeping tons of junk food around. In the USA, there is a fast food place or convenience store in practically every neighborhood. Make yourself bike or walk there to buy a candy bar or greasy order of French fries. Don't make it easy on yourself and stock them in the frig or freezer.
- Train other areas, too, not just your abs. With an overall focus on training all body regions, you can benefit with a firm, toned appearance all over. So include a full-body program, instead of just one for your abdominal region.
- Enjoy a good mindset by renaming your routine. In other words, instead of being a New Year's Resolution or Fitness Goal, etc...something so serious...make it fun-sounding like your "dream planning" or "new sculpted self" or something...be creative!
- Give yourself a break! Especially if and when you "may" happen to overindulge at mealtime or if you skip a workout or two...Pick yourself up, dust yourself off and forgive yourself. No one's perfect. Then climb back on that horse – or exercise bike - and get going!

Terrific Ab Toning Tips

Wouldn't it be super to have those 6-pack abs on infomercials? Here are some terrific tips on toning up yours. These can be incorporated into your daily routines, right in the privacy of your own home. Enjoy an improved appearance with regular practice.

1. Drink plenty of and a variety of watered beverages. Add variety to your diet with bottled water, flavored water, herbal teas, health beverages. They are mostly low calorie or calorie-free and filling to the stomach. And they help keep your metabolism on high mode.
2. Bowl of Berries – Add your favorite berries to your daily diet. They are loaded with fiber and help battle constipation and midsection swelling.
3. Non-alcohol - Avoid beverages with alcohol content. Alcohol is high on calories and can increase your cortisol levels, stress hormones that help the stomach store fat - -a no-no!
4. Get Active – You don't have to workout only in a gym. Increase physical activity in your life for more exercise. Wash your car – inside and out. Wash your windows – inside and out. Plant a garden – yes, inside in containers, and outside in the yard and in landscaped areas. Clean out your closets, your drawers, your basement, your attic, your living areas. Did you know that all that movement; walking, stepping, bending, twisting, lifting, etc. helps your entire body get and stay in shape - -all for free. PLUS you can burn an average of over 300 calories per hour! No membership fees are due either.
5. Posture – Sitting up straight can not only take pounds off your appearance, it actually conditions the muscles in your stomach region to stay tight. So sit up straight, shoulders back, chest out, chin up. And when seated, support your lower back with a the chair.
7. Work OUT – No need to do all your workouts in the gym or at home, either. Head outdoors. Exercise your body with golf, Putt-Putt Golf, zoo, science and art center activity centers, bating cages, putting ranges, community centers with local teams to join; basketball, volleyball, etc. So get moving!
8. Try some Pilates on for size! Pilates target your internal and external obliques, the abdominal muscles along the sides of your abdomen that form your waist. And they target your transverse abdominis which supports your back and holds in your belly - - a deep abdominal muscle often neglected in other forms of abdominal exercise. Psst! Want good posture, pain-free back and a flat tummy? A strong transverse abdominis is what you need.
9. Pilates also stretch and strengthen the muscles along your spine that hold your spinal column straight, aka the erector spinae.

For a program with a power boost combined with endurance, hit the Pilates and gain both strength and grace.

More Trainer's Tips

Here are some top exercises to do at home that were recommended by trainers at the American Council on Exercise (ACE), a nonprofit organization that certifies personal trainers. Prevention.com surveyed over 3,000 ACE certified trainers by e-mail received 500-plus responses. Based on their responses, here are what personal trainers say are the top “at-home exercises that were most likely to give you the results you want—in the least amount of time.”

Abs...

This award-winning intense workout allows for a greater range of motion. Balancing on the ball works the core stabilizer muscles in your back and your abdominal muscles. And since it takes less time to fatigue, there's no need to do as many of these as you would with good, ol' floor crunches.

“How To” guidelines: With the ball positioned to support your back, keep your feet flat on the floor. Then with your arms reaching out in front of you, curl up - slowly. Hold. Then lower.

Notes: For advanced workouts, place your hands behind your head. For beginners, it may be easier to start with crunches on the floor.

Buttocks...

Trainers liked these for these exercises for multiple reasons. They can be varied. They can be done about anywhere. And they work your leg muscles plus your gluteal muscles.

Lunges help with posture and balance. And squats help strengthen the legs for everyday functions like rising from a seated position. Both are especially necessary as we age, noted a couple of trainers.

“How To” guidelines for lunges: With your right foot about 2.5 feet in front of you, right knee slightly bent and directly over your ankle, drop your left knee to the floor. Your left heel should be off of the floor. Remain straight, no leaning forward. Hold. Then push yourself back up with your right foot. Repeat – only this time with your left leg in front.

Notes: For advanced workouts, begin by placing your feet together. Then step forward or backward into the lunge. Then push yourself back up to the starting position. For those with knee problems, you may want to do only partial squats or skip this exercise.

“How To” guidelines for squats: With your feet about shoulder width apart, stand with your back to a chair. Bend at your knees and hips. And lower your rear until it's just about touching the chair, keeping your knees behind your toes. (Note: you should be able to see your toes when you bend if you look downward. If you only see your knees, you are bending too far forward.). Hold. Then slowly return to original position.

Notes: For advanced workouts, hold dumbbells at your sides. For those with knee problems, stick with partial squats- - i.e. only lower yourself halfway to the chair.

Total Body...

To target each muscle group, head to the pool. Swimming offers a low impact way to work both your upper and lower body while maintaining proper alignment. The back and abs get a great workout in the process, too. Apart from the aerobic workout, water adds gentle resistance, challenging your muscles while resulting in fewer injuries.

EXTRA TIP: If you're going to focus on swimming for your main exercises, augment them with weight bearing exercise like jogging, walking, weight lifting or tennis to help keep your bones strong.

Arms....

Best for toning and firming, pushups still rank tops among trainers. They target mainly the triceps in the back of your arms, developing nicer-looking arms, chest muscles, the abs and the back, strengthening and stabilizing you. Even women are noted for learning them and progressing fast.

“How To” guidelines for pushups: Lying face down on the floor, place your hands by your shoulders and band your knees. Press your palms against the floor and straighten your arms, keeping your head, neck, back and hips in line while you lift your body up from the floor. Just before locking elbows (i.e. DON'T lock them), hold. Then lower yourself – slowly. Just before touching the floor, push back up. Repeat.

Notes: For advanced workouts, do pushups on your toes instead of your knees. For beginners, try doing them against a wall or leaning on a trailing or table.

Stair Climbs...

Head for the stairs, is the best option for those with little or no time for workouts. Forgo elevators, escalators and asking someone else to go “up” or “down” for you. Just do it!

The advantages of walking stair steps include increasing your heart rate, improving your posture, strengthening your lower body, and helping with the prevention of osteoporosis since this is a weight-bearing exercise and thus build bone. Walking steps also improves stamina. Trainers calculate that you should burn about 45 calories walking up and down stairs during a 5-minute period.

Dancing...

The main reasons that trainers like dancing are that it's fun and it's a great way to incorporate exercise and quality time into everyday routines.

Tap your toes. Grab a partner. Do a solo. All burn calories and work a variety of muscle groups. So grab a radio, cassette player CD, MP3 player or start whistling, humming or singing your favorite tune.

Best Exercises for Better Posture

Pinching Your Shoulder Blades

This exercise helps with those who slouch and hunch over computer or vehicle wheels all day. Pinching your shoulder blades helps work the trapezius and rhomboids, muscle groups that aid in your upright alignment, and helps keep the spine in its neutral, erect placement. It is also reported to open up the chest area and prevent “rounded shoulders syndrome.”

Heel Raises...

Many trainers believe heel raises are great for shapely calves. The exercise concentrates on the calves, is simple to learn and is noted to achieve results in a hurry.

“How To” guidelines for heel raises: With your feet nearly hip-width apart, stand. Rise up onto your toes. Hold. Then lower yourself back down slowly.

Note: For advanced workouts, try doing the exercise one leg at a time or try holding dumbbells. For beginners, you may want to hold on to a chair or wall to balance yourself.

Hamstring Stretching...

Since walking is a popular physical activity and exercise component, many trainers believe hamstring stretches are vital. Tight hamstrings can lead to back pain and injuries. And being flexible improves your walking posture.

“How To” guidelines for hamstring stretches: Stand. Place your right heel about 8 inches in front of you, toes pointing upward. For support, place your hands on your left thigh. Then bend your left knee and lean forward from the hips, shifting your weight back. Stick your rear out until you feel the stretch in the back of your right leg (a half-seated position.) Keep your back straight. Hold. Repeat. Alternate and do two or three stretches with each leg.

General Stretching...

People like stretching because it helps them rest better and improves the blood flow without tiring the body out too much. Plus it gives people a little “spurt” of energy.

This is a great way to get healthier even for couch potatoes. Just reach over that ottoman and S-T-R-E-T-C-H----!

Self-Help Guide – Getting and Staying Motivated

There are many ways to get and stay motivated with your workout plans. Try some of these and adjust them to fit with your own unique plans, activities - lifestyle.

Scale Back on the Scale - Toss aside the old dial or new digital scales and get back to basics. Check your clothes. Do they fit? Are they tighter than they were? If so, time to re-adjust eating plans maybe...or try a more intense workout - plus scale back on the extra snacking late at night. Or are your clothes loose around the waist? You're off to a good start then! Remember with weight fluctuations and water retention, weight isn't always an exact science.

Reward Yourself- No need to spend bucks here, although if it's in your budget, maybe save for a new swimsuit or jogging shoes for when you reach your goal. Other rewards could be adding a favorite healthy snack or activity to your schedule; icemilk or frozen yogurt with fresh fruit toppings, a walking date at a local park, a bike ride to your favorite restaurant, etc. Keep a list going of ideas, so when you need to spice up your life or re-energize or just do something different, you'll have plenty of ideas to choose from and can act NOW- instead of doing something unhealthy on a whim.

Circuit Training – Spice up your workout with some circuit training. Circuit training helps reach higher levels of strength and endurance, PLUS weight loss. Basically instead of exercising for a half-hour to an hour doing an aerobics activity plus about the same amount of time adding in some strength training, you combine both together. Have a trainer help you get a schedule together that alternates your activities every five minutes; for example, workout for five minutes on aerobics using a treadmill, bike, stair stepper, cross or elliptical trainer. Then alternate with a five-minute strength training workout using weight machines, dumbbells or bands.

Monitor Your Heart Rate – make sure you really are targeting your most aggressive levels. Professionals say that in order to get the most out of your workouts, you should reach 80 percent of your heart rate training zone. So measure your heart rate and get a “feel” for your body's workout mode. Choose one of several ways.

- A. Stopping briefly during your routine, placing a finger to your neck or other pulse point, and counting the heartbeats per minute.
- B. Measure your pulse rate on equipment that has monitors – like an exercise bike with handgrips. Check around to see what's available at your local gym or YMCA.
- C. Or use a Heart Rate Monitor. There are different kinds, but generally you either hook up with a chest strap or a James Bond-type wristwatch band. They both measure your heartbeats and come with various features like a pre-set mode to beep when you reach your desired target heart zone. Might want to check online auction sites for a deal like Ebay.

In Conclusion...

It's now up to you to incorporate ab basics, ab exercises with routines for all levels – from beginners to advanced, trainer tips, ab resources for more information and the Self-Help Guide forms tailored to fit your program and other information into your daily routine. The common goal is to help you learn more about healthy abs for men and women. Putting the information into practice is up to you!

Ab Resources

[EDiets.com](#) – They offer an inexpensive online fitness training membership area complete tools like a resting heart rate calculator, stress test, body mass index calculator and more. You can get help 24/7 from their virtual trainer, chat areas and forums, get help with your daily fitness schedule and even link in with dietary planning (many popular ones to choose from like Atkins, Weight Watchers, Slim Fast, etc.) and an online journal for noting entries throughout the day.

[Prevention Magazine](#) – This magazine shares tips for diet, exercise and more. Their online site at prevention.com hosts discussions, forums, articles on fitness, health, weight loss and other topics for more help.

Contact them at:

General Customer Service

610-967-8527

Mon to Fri 9am - 8pm

PVNcustserv@Rodale.com

How to Find a Personal Trainer - For information about the American Council on Exercise (ACE), a nonprofit organization that certifies personal trainers or to locate an ACE-certified personal trainer near you, call (800) 825-3636, or visit their website at <http://www.acefitness.org>