

If I earned a fiver for every time a client asked me what the secret to a flat stomach is, I'd be rich by now.



The truth is that there is no secret to great looking abs and no one all-time-best abdominal exercise you must do to get them. You do, however, need to train hard and eat sensibly to achieve flatness, definition and strength. Here I have tried to cover the fundamental 'secrets' that, if followed consistently, will get you there.

Body fat

Your first consideration in the quest for better looking abs should be your level of body fat. Most people store excess fat around their waistline, so you could have defined biceps and shoulders from your workouts, but won't be able to see your abs if they are covered in a greater percentage of fat. So, it's important to understand that it's not about how many crunches you do, or how long you can hold a plank for - it's about how lean you are, which can only be achieved through appropriate diet and exercise.

It's even harder for women to get a 'six-pack' as they naturally carry more essential fat than men - and unless you get rid of the fat covering them, your abs won't show no matter how many crunches you do. For women especially, a 'six-pack' may be an unrealistic goal as the low body fat required (around 12-18%) can be an unhealthy extreme unless you're a seasoned athlete.

Diet

What you eat and drink is the key to reducing body fat to a level that gives you the flatness and definition you want. A trainer can measure your body fat for you so that you know how much you need to lose to be within a healthy range (which depends on your age and sex). Stick to a balanced diet with plenty of protein and limited carbs and fat; cut back on salt, caffeine and fizzy drinks, all of which can cause bloating, and drink plenty of fluids to flush out excess salt and reduce fluid retention. You may also need to address your portion sizes. Try to avoid eating late at night as your body needs more calories during the day when you are active, rather than when your body is slowing down for the night. Fill up on fibre, such as wholegrain bread, fruit and vegetables, which can help you lose weight by filling you up without all the calories.

Exercise

As well as focusing on nutrition, you need to do a combination of cardio (to work the heart) and resistance training



How to get fab abs

(weights) to reduce body fat. Activities such as cycling, running, rowing or brisk walking, should be performed several times a week at a variety of effort levels to reap maximum fat burning rewards. As with all exercise, doing the same thing, in the same way at the same effort level soon sees you at a plateau, which halts progress. Resistance training will help develop lean muscle, which requires more energy than fat, elevates your metabolism permanently and accelerates fat loss.

Posture

Poor posture can give you a bigger looking belly. If you are round-shouldered, your tummy may protrude at the bottom due to the slump of your shoulders and upper back. If you have an excessively curved lower back, your whole tummy can protrude. This type of posture can often lead to back problems as well as making your stomach stick out. The ideal posture for a healthy spine and flatter-looking stomach is neutral spine, which is midway between arched and flat. Ask a qualified trainer to show you how to find neutral spine and try to maintain this posture all the time and especially during exercise to help prevent injury.

Abdominal work

We have three sets of abdominal muscles: the superficial rectus abdominus (RA), or 'six-pack' muscle, which bends the trunk; the obliques (internal and external), which side-bend and twist the trunk; and the deeper transversus abdominus (TA), which is your girdle of strength and works with your pelvic floor (PF). Many people fail to train their TA (part of the core) and PF, yet these large, underlying muscles really are like a girdle that needs to be pulled in through appropriate exercise to achieve flat abs. Pilates is excellent for this but it's important to learn the

technique of engaging the TA and PF or you won't benefit from the exercises. If you can't feel your abs contracting during an exercise, it's probably because you're doing something wrong - and not because you're supremely strong! Enlist the help of a qualified trainer to show you a variety of exercises and do them under supervision so that they can watch your technique. Abdominal work on an unstable surface such as a stability ball or BOSU increases abdominal activity and works your core, so incorporate some of this into your programme.

Genetics

We all have to work with the body shape we're born with. Some people carry more weight round their middle whilst others carry it on their hips and thighs. Different body types respond to the same training in different ways, and it's important to recognise this and keep your goals realistic and achievable, and develop your exercise regime accordingly.

Rest

Yes it does play a part! You need to be consistent and train hard to get results, but your body actually only adapts and gets stronger during rest. Give yourself sufficient rest between workouts, depending on your training regime, so that you don't over-train (which is counter-productive), and to ensure that you get the abs you want.

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COMPETITION

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