

6 STEPS TO A SUPER-FLAT STOMACH

Busting all myths about abdominal exercises, personal trainer Bernadette Abraham shows you how to build core strength and get fab, toned abs with zero crunches or sit-ups.

ONE OF THE MOST commonly asked fitness questions is, "How do I get a flat, toned stomach?". Contrary to popular belief, your abdominal training should not consist of only the traditional crunches or curl-ups – in fact, they should be limited to being just a part of the routine.

Your ab routine needs to focus on balancing strength in the abdominals and lower back, which are vital for stability. Besides the obvious aesthetic appeal of a well-defined mid-line, a strong core helps stabilise your everyday movements.

The core is where the body's centre of gravity is located and where all movement begins. It is not only comprised of the abdominals, but also the muscles that surround the lower part of the spine, pelvis, and hips. An efficient core is necessary for maintaining proper muscle balance and serves as a protective mechanism to relieve the spine of harmful forces that occur during daily activities. If any of these muscles are weak, everyday movement, posture, and performance are compromised. This in turn causes muscle compensations and can potentially cause pain, specifically in the lower back.

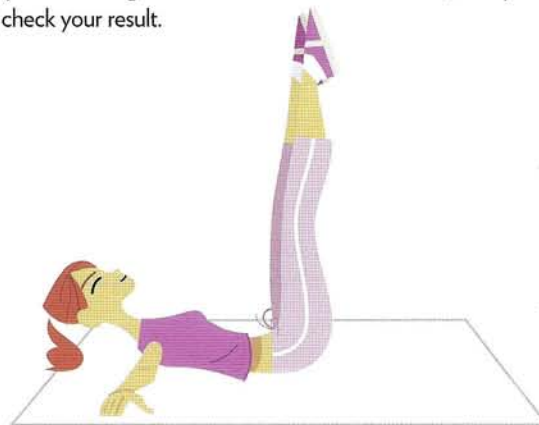
It is estimated that 85 per cent of the adult US population experiences lower back pain; a weak core is often the culprit for this symptom. Like a pebble dropped into a pond, the effects of the core are felt throughout the entire body.

The following routine uses a multi-dimensional approach to develop core strength and gain a great looking set of abs. However, in addition to core training, you must reduce body fat in order to see results. Combine this routine with cardiovascular exercise (walking, jogging, biking, swimming, and aerobics); strength training (can be performed using gym machines, dumb-bells, resistance bands, and even your own body weight); and flexibility exercises (stretches held in place for at least 20 seconds); as well as a healthy diet. Remember, this routine is for people with intermediate to advanced fitness levels, so don't try this if you haven't worked out in a long time. Take our 'core strength' test to find out what your level is.

TEST YOUR CORE STRENGTH

How far can your legs go while keeping your lower back flat on the floor?

- Lie on your back, keeping your lower back flat on the floor and both legs extended towards the ceiling with your arms extended to each side.
- Slowly lower your legs towards the floor, while keeping your lower back flat on the floor. Don't forget to breathe normally!
- As soon as your back begins to arch and come off the floor, note your position and check your result.



RESULTS:

1. If your legs lowered only a few inches (75 degree angle), you display poor abdominal stability and will need to work on basic trunk stabilisation exercises (consult a fitness professional to start) before performing the following core routine.
2. If your legs reach an approximate angle of 50 degrees, your core strength is moderate. Perform the exercises with the modifications listed in the notes to reduce the level of difficulty if need be.
3. If your legs almost reached the floor (5 degree angle), your core strength is excellent.

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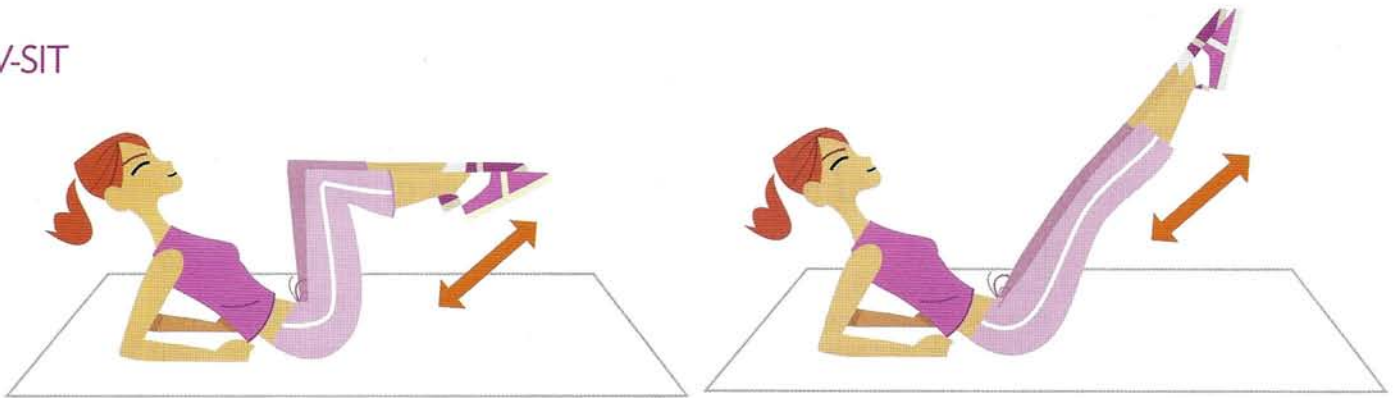
1. DEEP EXHALES (TARGETS THE DEEPEST ABDOMINAL MUSCLE)

Step 1: Sit up on your knees, buttocks on your heel, or sit with your legs crossed, with your spine fully extended and neutral. Open your chest and keep your chin parallel to the floor.

Step 2: Inhale through your nose and quickly exhale with short powerful bursts through pursed lips for 30 to 60 seconds, making a 'shh, shh, shh' sound. Allow the air to move in and out quickly as you focus on the abdominal region.

Expert advice: If this exercise makes you dizzy or lightheaded, stop immediately and discontinue the exercise.

2. V-SIT



Step 1: Lie on your back with your legs straight and support your back by propping yourself onto your elbows. Bring your knees into your chest.

Step 2: Slowly extend your legs diagonally (i.e. not towards the ceiling and not in a horizontal line) until your knees are slightly bent so that you form a V with your legs and trunk. Hold the position for two to four seconds, and slowly return the knees into the chest. Perform 10 repetitions.

Expert advice: To decrease the level of difficulty, extend one leg at a time while the other knee remains at the chest.

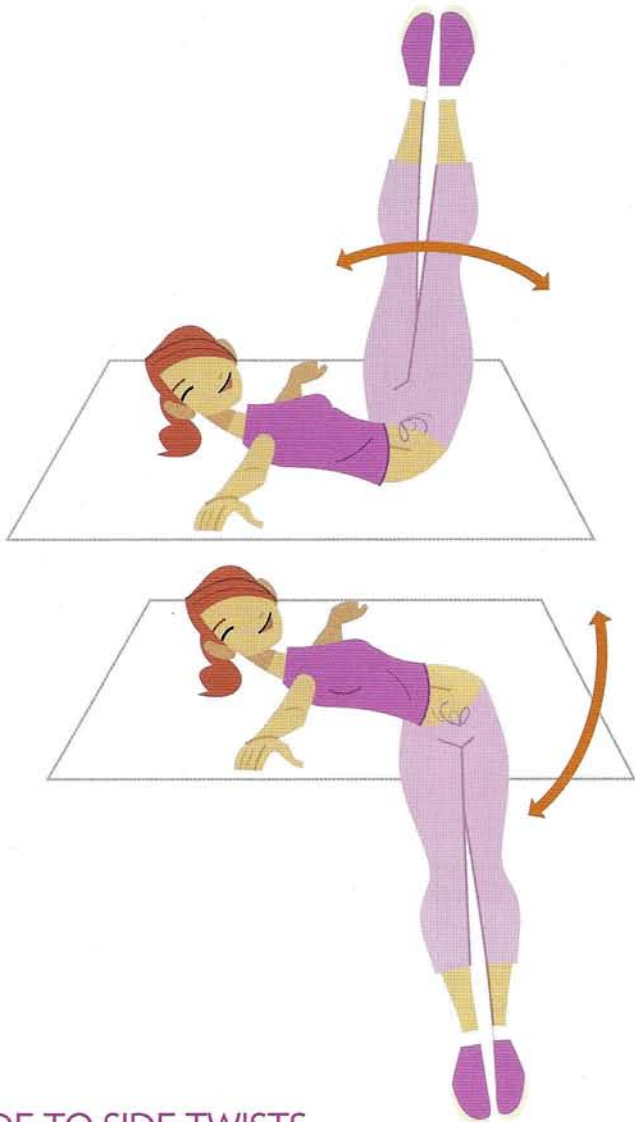
3. SCISSOR LEGS

Step 1: Lie on your back with your legs straight and support your back by propping yourself onto your elbows. Lift your legs about six inches (15 centimeters) from the floor.

Step 2: Keep your knees slightly bent and alternate lifting your legs as high as possible in a smooth, slow, and controlled motion. Do not let momentum and gravity assist the abdominal muscles. As one leg lifts, the other leg should remain six inches from the floor. Perform 10 repetitions for each leg.

Expert advice: To decrease the level of difficulty, bend your knees or place one foot on the ground as the other leg lifts as high as possible, then switch. If you feel any pain or discomfort in your back, discontinue the exercise.





4. SIDE TO SIDE TWISTS

Step 1: Lie on your back with your arms out to each side at shoulder height. Raise your legs towards the ceiling at a 90 degree angle with your knees slightly bent. Also raise your head and shoulders off the floor so that you are looking at your navel, but do not let your chin touch your chest.

Step 2: Allow gravity to gently pull your legs from one side to another as far as you can resist without letting the legs fall to the floor. Your legs should remain together throughout the exercise and should not come closer than three inches from the floor.

Expert advice: A towel or pillow can be used to help support your neck.

THE CORE OF THE MATTER

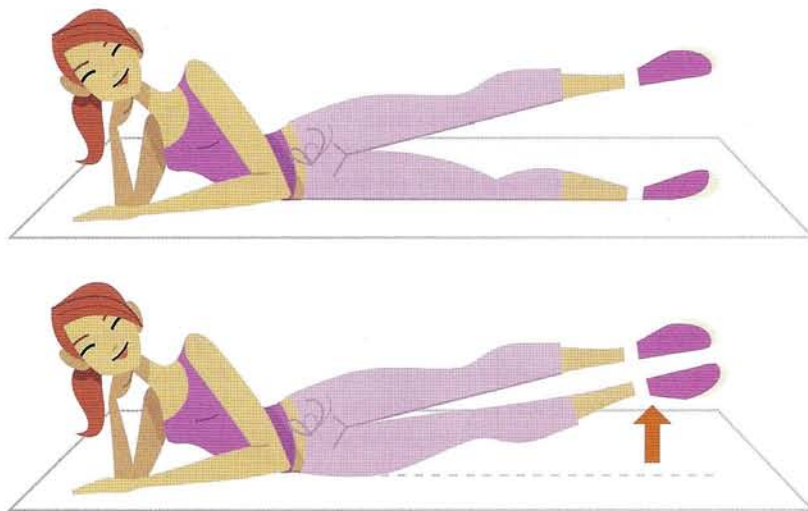
- Before each exercise, pull your belly button in towards the spine narrowing the waistline.
- Breathe naturally throughout the exercise.
- Focus on the muscles you are working.
- Do not perform the exercise too fast.
- Let the core muscles do the work – not gravity or momentum.

5. ALTERNATE LEG TOUCH

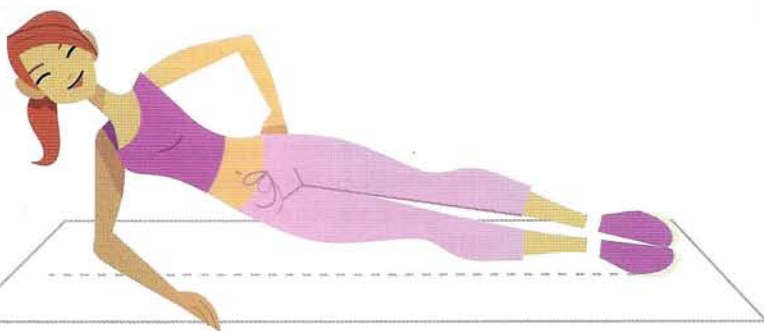
Step 1: Lie on your side with one leg on top of the other. Rest your head in the palm of one hand while the other hand is placed on the floor in front of the body for support. Lift the top leg one foot off the floor.

Step 2: Raise your bottom leg from the floor until it touches the top leg, then lower back down to the floor. Return the top leg to the bottom and repeat the exercise from the beginning. Perform 10 repetitions and repeat on the other side.

Expert advice: Do not let your body roll front or back. Keep your upper body as stable as possible throughout the exercise by imagining a cup of hot tea resting on your shoulder.



6. SIDE PLANK



Step 1: Lie on your side with both legs on top of the other and your elbow on the ground at a 90 degree angle, directly beneath your shoulder. Keep your head and neck relaxed and in a neutral position. Rest your free arm on your side or on the floor in front of the body for support.

Step 2: Contract your abdominals and raise your hips towards the ceiling until your feet, legs, hips, shoulders and head form a tight, straight line. Hold the position for five to ten seconds and breathe normally. Perform 10 repetitions and repeat on the other side.

Expert advice: To decrease the level of difficulty, bend your knees or place one foot on the ground as the other leg lifts as high as possible, then switch. If you feel any pain or discomfort in your back, discontinue the exercise. **A**