Dear Alice,

Please help me out. I have been working out a lot lately, spending most of my time on my stomach. I need to know the proper way to do sit-ups. There are a lot of rumors out there. I have heard a lot of different positions to do them. I need to know the best way to do them. Also, should I do them slowly or as fast as I am able to?

Thanks,

?Ab man

Answer

Dear Ab man,

Forget pretzel-like positions and expensive gadgets ? the best exercise for strengthening your abdominal muscles (fondly known as "abs") is the basic crunch. Proper form is essential to strengthening the abs. Beginners may start with 10 - 15 repetitions. As you become stronger, you may perform more repetitions, or hold each contraction for five seconds, or longer. This can get really tough! Since your stomach muscles are comprised of different sections, you can work each separately.

For the upper portion of the abs, you can do a basic crunch:

- Lie on your back, with knees bent and feet flat on the floor.
- Beginners: cross arms over chest; others: rest hands behind the head (be sure NOT to pull on your neck). In either arm position, place your chin at a fist's distance from your chest.
- Raise your chest and shoulders several inches from the ground, keeping your feet and lower back flat on the floor. Exhale as you come up, inhale as you lower back down.
- Keep your movements slow and controlled, feeling the contraction in your midsection only. Fast jerky movements do not work the muscle properly.

For the obliques (the muscles on either side of the center of your belly):

- Start in the basic crunch position.
• With hands placed lightly behind your head, raise your chest and shoulders, twisting your torso so that one shoulder moves towards the opposite knee.
• Lower and repeat with the other shoulder, alternating back and forth.

For the lower abs (the section below your navel):

• Begin in the basic crunch position.
• Bring your knees up toward your chest in a 90° angle (forming an "L" shape with your body).
• Using only your abdominal muscles, not your hips or legs, move your knees slightly toward your chest as you exhale.
• Return to the starting position.
• Repeat.
• This is a very small movement — don't bring your knees up to your face.

If you're properly working your abs, but are disappointed with the results, remember that strength training a specific muscle group doesn't reduce the amount of fat over that area. Cardiovascular exercise and proper diet can help reduce body fat. Unfortunately, it is difficult to control where fat loss (or fat storage) occurs. Some people are predisposed to carry a little extra padding in their midsection. Others, because of the way their internal organs are situated, appear to have a bit of a "tummy." Instead of focusing too hard on one area, why not engage in a variety of exercises and strive for overall fitness? You can check out the related questions for some ideas for getting fit.

Alice!
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Resources

Dodge Fitness Center (Morningside) [11]
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