

The Importance of Abdominal Exercises

Just as a house is supported by its underlying framework, our abdominal muscles can be thought of as the foundation of our bodies, working within an intricate network of ligaments to support the movement of the spine and back. When our stomach muscles are fit and toned, they provide the core strength our bodies rely on for overall health and wellness.

The human body has two major types of muscles in the midsection. Located at the front of the stomach, **flexors** help support the movement and bending of the spine and hip bones. The **obliques** run down the side of your stomach (in the “love handles” area), and help to promote healthy posture when standing upright. **Extensors** are actually found in our back and gluteus area, but these rear muscles work closely with stomach muscles to promote healthy posture and efficient torso movement.

Very few people actually look forward to abdominal exercises—in fact, most of us view them as a dreaded chore. Like them or not, ab exercises are an integral component in maintaining peak physical fitness. Over time, unused stomach muscles will weaken and provide less support, requiring a disproportionate amount of work on the part of the spine and the back. A typical person’s daily activities don’t demand nearly enough activity or motion of the midsection, making targeted abdominal workouts a necessity.

In addition to the obvious aesthetic rewards of the sculpted, toned midriff to which we all aspire, the maintenance of the midsection can reap a host of health benefits:

- Strong stomach muscles help to alleviate back pain and prevent future back injuries

- A healthier posture is achieved, making physical activities less taxing on the body

- Cardiovascular workouts become more efficient when the trunk of the body is in good working shape

- For both men and women, studies have shown that the risk of heart disease decreases exponentially with smaller waist sizes

For women who are pregnant or may become pregnant, abdominal strength becomes even more important. Robust stomach muscles can help lessen strain on the back as the pregnancy progresses, and can also facilitate an easier, more efficient labor and delivery. Women with good core strength are also more likely to return to their pre-pregnancy state quicker than those with flaccid, unused stomach muscles. (It’s important to note that standard stomach exercises will need to be modified somewhat to reduce the risk of stress on the unborn baby; pregnant women should consult a doctor before beginning an abdominal workout regimen.)

Unfortunately, there are no “magic” formulas when it comes to achieving sculpted abs. For best results, you should perform efficient stomach exercises at least 3-4 times per week. An effective routine combines a variety of exercises that target all of the core muscles. Traditional sit-ups work the upper abdominals, while pelvic tilts and leg raises manipulate the lower stomach muscles. Side twists and standing arm raises help to tone the obliques. When you pair regular workouts with a sensible, low-fat diet, you should begin to see and feel results within a few weeks.