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**Conquering
all obstacles**

Trimming those abs

■ BY MATT BRZYCKI

I usually get a lot of questions through phone calls, e-mails and “drop-ins.”



Matt Brzycki

Perhaps the one topic that I get asked about the most has to do with trimming the abdomen. The two main queries that I hear pertain to losing the “spare tire” and getting rid of the “love handles.”

What must be understood first is that everyone has “ripped abs” (aka “six-pack abs” and “washboard abs”). It’s true. Now, whether or not the abdominals can be seen is another story. It boils down to the amount of fat that lies atop those muscles.

When a thin layer of fat overlays the abdominals, the muscles can be seen in all their glory. But when a thick layer of fat overlays the abdominals, the muscles are camouflaged. So, the real challenge here is to determine an effective way to reduce the fat that’s located on the front and sides of the abdomen.

FAT STORAGE: A PRIMER

The storage form of excess calories is fat. People have a tendency to store fat in certain parts of their body based upon gender. Men tend to store fat in their upper backs and abdomen; women tend to store fat in their hips and legs. Or look at it this way: Men tend to store fat in their upper bodies and women tend to store fat in their lower bodies.

Because of the inescapable influence of genetics, people also tend to store fat in the same regions of the body that their ancestors did. So if your ancestors stored fat in their abdominal area, then there’s a pretty good chance that you will, too (regardless of whether you’re a man or woman).

Along these lines, people tend to store fat in a certain pattern. By this I mean that when fat is stored, it might get deposited in the abdomen first, the upper back next and then the face. Now for the real kicker: When you lose fat, it tends to come off in the reverse order. In

the previous example, fat would be lost from the neck first, the upper back next and then the abdomen.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

One tactic that has been promoted as a way to trim the abdomen is to do endless numbers of sit-ups/crunches, knee-ups and other abdominal exercises, sometimes more than once per day. Years ago, I knew one well-meaning individual – a former professional wrestler – who did 1,500 crunches each day and still looked like he swallowed a compact car.

Why were his Olympian efforts to no avail?

Well, abdominal exercises certainly involve the abdominal muscles but they have little effect on the pesky layer of fat that resides over the abdomen. This is because fat cannot be selectively lost from isolated areas of the body. When people exercise, fat is drawn from throughout their body as a source of fuel. So by doing countless abdominal exercises, you can “spot train” the area but cannot “spot reduce” it. When you lose fat, you’ll lose it from all over your body (in an order that’s consistent with your genetic predisposition).

In one classic study, 13 subjects did a total of 5,004 sit-ups over a period of 27 days. The researchers found that despite focusing on their abdomen, the subjects lost fat equally from their abdomen, subscapular area (upper back) and glutes (hips). In other words, exercising their abdominal muscles didn’t preferentially affect the fat in their abdomen any more than their upper back or hips. Frankly, you can do abdominal exercises until you pass out but it won’t automatically trim your abdomen.

To avoid any misunderstanding, you can and should do exercises for the front and side parts of your abdomen. But there’s no reason for you to spend all day doing so. In fact, you’ll get good results by simply doing one exercise for your front abdomen and another for your side abdomen

as part of a program that involves strength training (for your entire body) and aerobic training. Also important in trimming the abdomen is a sincere effort to cut back on calories, especially those derived from high-fat foods.

What exercises should you do? There’s nothing magical here. For the front part of your abdomen, you can do any exercise in which you bring your torso toward your legs. And for the side of your abdomen, you can do any exercise in which you bend your torso laterally or rotate your torso.

THE BOTTOM LINE

You can trim your abdominals but don’t overemphasize exercises for that area and be realistic about your results. ♥

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