

The Abs-olute Truth

The Lowdown on Getting a Ripped-Up Midsection
by Doug Brignole • Photography by Michael Neveux

Getting a lean and muscular midsection could possibly be the most common fitness goal, as well as the most misunderstood. Yet it's really very simple. That doesn't mean without effort. It just means uncomplicated.

There are three reasons that achieving a lean midsection is so misunderstood:

- 1) Misleading advertising and/or misguided instruction
- 2) Wishful thinking
- 3) Lack of understanding of how the body works

It might seem reasonable to believe that abdominal fat can be reduced or eliminated by working that area—doing situps, leg raises, twists, side bends, etc.—but if you believe that, you're mistaken in a big way. Companies trying to sell you an abdominal-exercise product, a course or a book often lie to you (what a surprise!) so they can make a profit. They tell you that you can exclusively reduce abdominal fat by

using their product—and you believe them.

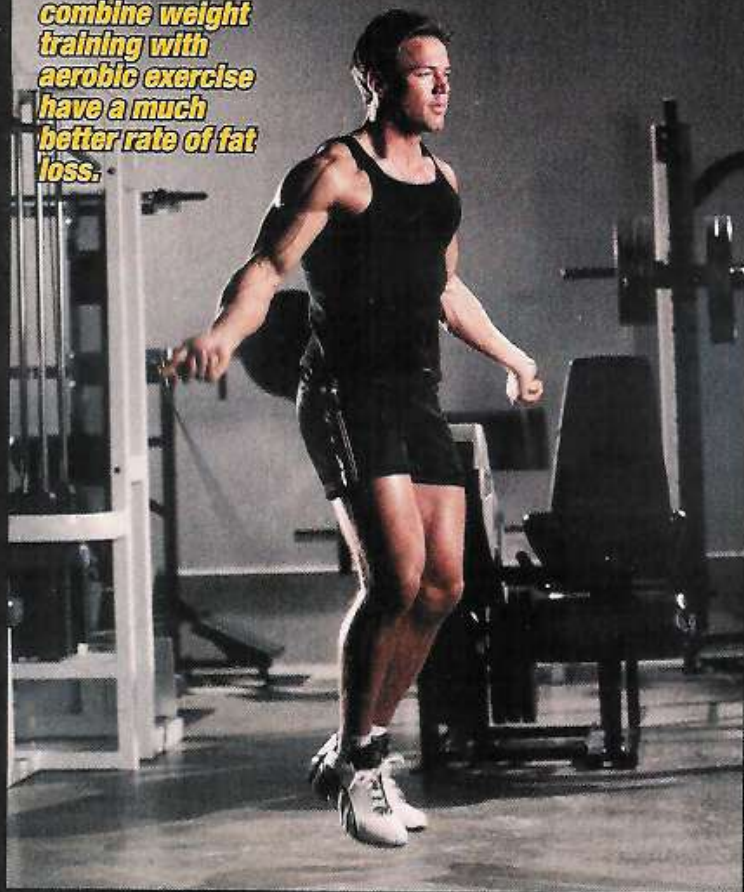
The truth is that your lifestyle created the problem, and the solution must address your lifestyle—both your diet and your overall exercise program. The idea that one exercise, or a killer ab routine alone, will make your abs ripped is wishful thinking. For those of you who are guilty of that sort of optimism, ripped abs will remain a fantasy until you understand how the body loses fat and then do the correct homework.

The Myth of Spot Reduction

You can't specifically lose abdominal fat by doing abdominal exercise. Period. That bears repeating for the simple reason that, although people have heard that they can't spot-reduce their midsection and say they understand it, they continue doing things that demonstrate a belief in spot reduction. It's impossible to lose *any* abdominal fat by doing abdominal exercises.



Those who combine weight training with aerobic exercise have a much better rate of fat loss.



Model: Sebastian Seigel

When you perform abdominal exercise, the muscle underneath the fat layer does the work. Ab exercises benefit the muscle under the fat but do nothing for the fat layer that covers the muscle.

The jiggly stuff that's on your midsection is not untuned muscle, nor is it "flab" that can be "firmed up" or converted into muscle. It's fat, and it can only be reduced as part of a whole-body fat-loss plan. You might indeed have well-developed abdominal muscle under that fat, but you'll never see it until you address your overall diet and exercise program—regardless of how many situps or crunches or leg raises you do.

If you do daily abdominal exercises and/or high-repetition ab crunches or leg raises, you're demonstrating a belief in spot reduction. Stop it. It's a waste of time. It hasn't worked, and it won't work in the

future.

You can't choose where to take fat off your body—just as you cannot choose where to add fat to it. That's a physiological fact. You must put your entire body into fat-loss mode in order to lose fat around your midsection. Have you ever seen anyone with ripped abs who was fat everywhere else? Of course not. And you never will. You must get leaner overall if you want a lean midsection.

How Fat Gets "Burned"

Fat is stored on the body in a specific molecular form: adipose tissue. The body cannot and does not burn adipose tissue. For

bodyfat loss to occur, your body must first convert adipose tissue into free fatty acids, which are the usable form of fuel. Only then can your body actually use it—spend it, burn it, whatever you want to call it.

When that conversion takes place, it does so systemically—throughout the entire body—not locally. After the conversion, free fatty acids enter the bloodstream and go to the working muscle. In other words, tiny amounts of free fatty acids, which were converted from tiny amounts of adipose tissue, which came from all over your entire body simultaneously, provide whichever muscle is working with its necessary fuel. The larger muscles—like the leg muscles—are more likely to require that sort of fuel.

That's why people lose fat everywhere on their body—including their face—when they pedal a stationary bicycle, even though they're peddling only with their legs. Fat comes off the body only as a whole.

The process happens only if your diet is right. If your diet is wrong and there's plenty of fuel in the bloodstream from foods you've recently eaten, your body won't have to spend its fat stores. Further, if your insulin level is high during your workout because just beforehand you ate some candy, bread or other sugary, starchy carbohydrate, mistakenly believing it would give you energy, your body will resist giving up its reserve fat even if your

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total calorie intake is fairly low. Those are just two reasons people often don't lose bodyfat, even though they're exercising: They're still eating too much, and/or they're eating the wrong kinds of foods.

How to Get Leaner Overall, Part 1: The Diet

You must make dietary changes in order to lose bodyfat. Specifically,



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Model: Tony Rezek

you must reduce your calories, but, perhaps more important, you must reduce or eliminate certain types of food and replace them with better choices. Starches and sugars cause the body to produce more insulin, and that will cause your body to store more bodyfat and/or restrict fat loss—even if you're exercising every day and even if your calorie intake is not exceptionally high. Some people produce more insulin than others. If you tend to have a weight problem, it's likely that you are one of those people. Dietary

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Starches and sugars are considered high-glycemic, which means that they convert quickly to glucose and therefore result in a dramatic rise in your insulin production. Instead, try getting your carbohydrates from vegetables like broccoli, cauliflower, zucchini, squash, tomatoes, peas and carrots; from legumes, such as lentils, black beans

and sugars, and a slight increase of healthful fats, has produced more fat loss and better health.

Try eating four or five small meals, and make sure that each of them has a protein source, a low-glycemic-carbohydrate source and a little fat. For example, grilled chicken, steamed vegetables with a little olive oil and an avocado. Or scrambled eggs with ham and black beans. Or a steak, a salad with dressing and some fruit.

How to Get Leaner Overall—Part 2: The Exercise Program

The best approach is a combination of aerobic exercise and whole-body resistance training. Each type of exercise has a different fat-loss effect. Resistance training makes all of your muscles more metabolically active, meaning that they burn more calories all day long, when they're strong. Plus, those who do only aerobic exercise tend to become more efficient at it, meaning that their bodies eventually learn to conserve fuel while doing aerobic exercise, which means less fat loss. Those who combine weight training with aerobic exercise have a much better rate of fat loss.

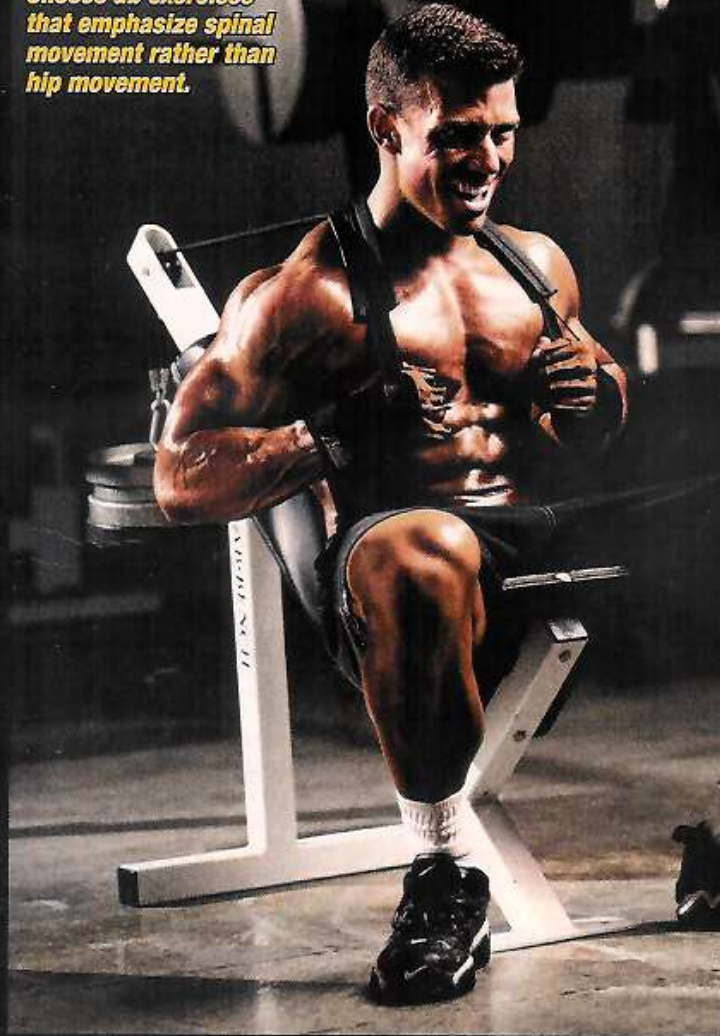
Interval training works best when you're doing cardiovascular exercise. Low-intensity, long-duration exercise is ultimately less effective than either high-intensity, short-duration (15 to 20 minutes) or alternating between high intensity (for one minute) and then low intensity (for one minute). High intensity burns more overall calories in a shorter period of time, and it stimulates your metabolism more than low-intensity aerobic exercise.

When doing your weight training, try to emphasize working the larger muscle groups, like your legs, your back and your pectoral muscles. The smaller muscles, like the shoulders and arms, contribute much less to the overall metabolism. For best results, try weight training two to five days per week, with either a full-body workout or a split program on which you work different bodyparts on different days. The more often you exercise, the better the result, obviously.

and kidney beans; and to a lesser degree some fruits. Try to avoid as much as possible flour products—breads, pasta, crackers and flour tortillas—as well as potatoes, white rice and sugar. And don't be afraid to eat foods that contain dietary fat, such as nuts, avocados, olive oil or cheese.

Although some people still advocate a lowfat, high-carb diet, there's plenty of evidence that obesity rises dramatically with that type of plan. Further, new research has demonstrated that a reduction of starches

Choose ab exercises that emphasize spinal movement rather than hip movement.



than hip movement. Crunches are infinitely better than leg raises. My favorites are decline crunches and kneeling cable crunches.

There is no such thing as a "lower" ab. The abdominal muscle is one continuous muscle that begins at the base of the rib cage and ends at the pubic bone of the pelvis. Nor can you work one end of the muscle more than the other end. The whole muscle works evenly.

Anybody who says, "This works the lower abs," is either grossly mistaken or fibbing for the sake of marketing. You can't lose lower-abdominal fat because spot reduction is impossible, and you can't work only the lower part of the muscle because it isn't a separate muscle.

You also can't add "notches" to your abs. When you're lean enough—for men, it's usually around 8 percent bodyfat; for women around 15 percent—and your abs are visible, the shape and number of grooves your ab muscle shows is fixed. It's determined by genetics. You can't add a third or fourth row of ab muscles simply by working them. It's a fibrous divider that's been either there or not since birth.

Model: Jonathan Lawson

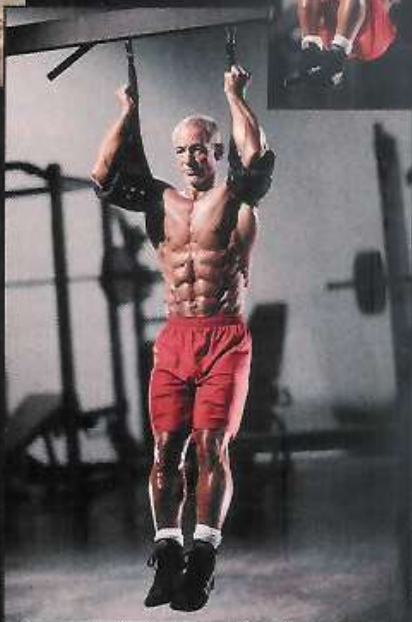


Abdominal Exercise

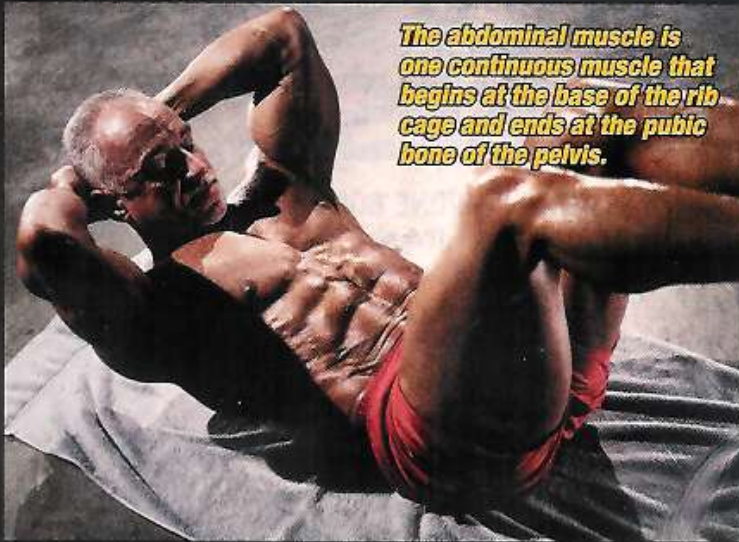
Work your abdominal muscles the same way you would work any other muscle in your body—two to three times per week (not on consecutive days), approximately three to eight sets of 15 to 20 repetitions, with full-range-of-motion exercise and a resistance that challenges the muscle. In other words, think of your ab exercises the way you would your chest or back exercises. You'd never think to do 100 partial-range-of-motion reps of a chest or back exercise. Instead, you'd do slow, deliberate, full-range-of-motion work for 15 to 20 repetitions. Do the same thing for your abs.

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Model: Dave Goodin



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Photo: Dave Goodin

When the abdominal muscle contracts, the rib cage and the pelvis get closer together, which creates a “curling” of the torso. And when the muscle extends, or stretches, it enables the rib cage and pelvis to get farther apart, which creates an arching of the torso. That should be the goal of any abdominal exercise—to arch the spine and then curl the spine. It’s a classic crunching movement.

Too often I see people doing something they might call an abdominal crunch, but it’s little more than a head and neck lift. To say that it uses an incomplete range of motion is an understatement. It’s about a 10 percent range of motion. You gotta crunch the rest of that 90 percent if you want to develop the muscle. And if that means you do fewer reps, fine. Fifteen solid, forceful repetitions of full-range-of-motion crunches done with a deliberate contraction on each rep is far better than 100 reps of 10 percent range of motion done with no deliberate contraction. No question about it.

If you’re one of those people who do endless reps of teeny-tiny crunches, you’re wasting your time and energy. You won’t get any sort of result that way. You’re neither burning fat nor developing muscle. Instead, use a three-pronged approach:

1) Make the appropriate changes to your diet.

2) Combine smart aerobic exercise with full-body resistance training.

3) Work your ab muscles no differently than you would any other muscle—nonconsecutive days, 15 to 20 reps per set, four to eight total sets per workout, using full range of motion and deliberate contraction.

That type of program will give you the best odds of achieving your goal. Genetics also plays a role in determining your ultimate result, as do any hormone or metabolic problems you may have. It would be a mistake to assume that everyone who uses the same program gets the same result. As they say, “Results may vary.” I recommend that the amount of effort you use should be “reasonable,” as determined by your own sensibilities—unless you’re preparing for physique competition or you have a temporary, short-term goal, like a high school reunion, after which you can return to a more balanced program.

The bottom line is that the *only* smart way to achieve a lean midsection is by addressing the big picture: your overall bodyfat situation. The way to do that is by addressing your diet and overall exercise program—of which your actual abdominal exercises are only a small part, as ironic as that may seem.

Editor’s note: Find Doug Brignole’s blog at www.IronManMagazine.com. **IM**