

**MUSCLE  
& FITNESS**  
PRESENTS

**TOTAL**


# **ABS**

**BUILD A ROCK-HARD MIDSECTION IN FOUR WEEKS**

BY THE EDITORS OF MUSCLE & FITNESS

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**TOTAL  
ANBS**



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# FOREWORD

## SIX LITTLE BUMPS CAN MAKE A BIG DIFFERENCE

Two guys are walking down the beach (no, this isn't the start of a joke). After an intense workout, these training partners have decided to display the fruits of their labor down by the shore, where they make a friendly wager on whose physique will draw more admiring glances. One of the guys is big, with broad shoulders, a shadow-casting chest, and arms the size of legs. He also has a sizable midsection, with nary a hint of definition. The other isn't nearly as massive as his buddy, but has crisp conditioning, most noticeably in a six-pack so sharp you could strike a match on it. Which one of the two do you have winning the bet? If you're like me, you put your money on Mr. Abs.

The above scenario isn't entirely fictional; it's actually rooted in my own history. When I was 19 my training partner and I decided to make a cross-country pilgrimage from New York to bodybuilding's "mecca": Southern California. We'd both trained hard for the trip in an attempt to look like we belonged with the "in" crowd. At 5'9", I'd gotten myself up to 200 pounds for it—about 40 more than my birdlike bone structure was made to carry.

Feeling full of ourselves, we unpacked our luggage upon arriving at our hotel and then made a beeline to Muscle Beach in Venice. Wearing bathing suits and nothing else, we trained on the beach, making sure to keep our shoulders back and chests puffed out at all times.

Suddenly, in between sets of dips, a kid who was watching us train came up to me and asked, "Are you guys football players?"

"No, we're bodybuilders!" I quickly asserted, probably sounding more than a bit defensive. Actually, I was crestfallen. I'd worked so hard throughout my teens to be a bodybuilder, only to be mistaken for a...football player! (Keep in mind that in the '80s the NFL didn't have nearly as many physical specimens as it does today.)

When we returned to the hotel I took a sober look in the mirror. *Why didn't that kid ask me if I was a bodybuilder?* I wondered, as my eyes scanned my reflected image. I was big for sure, and proportioned, but I couldn't help notice the amorphous expanse between my chest and bathing suit. There was a faint shadow of three rows of abs there, but nothing to write home about. Truth is, I barely trained them. Then, when I estimated my body fat to be about 15%, the kid's comment began to make sense to me. And just like that, I got it. I understood how abdominals can make or break a physique.

The fact is that there's no muscle group with the same ability to impress. Maybe it's because they make up the most expansive part of the front of the

body, while visually tying together the upper and lower halves. Or possibly because, since the time of the ancient Greeks, a well-developed midsection has signified health, strength, and vitality. Or it might have to do with the cultural perception forged by action stars like Bruce Lee, Sylvester Stallone, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and Jean-Claude Van Damme (you knew that Van Damme was ready to kick ass and take names when his abdominals resembled the underside of an egg carton!).

Whatever your motivation, your decision to build a great set of abs is one you not only looking good, but healthy as well. How does having great abs equal good health? Well, to get them you have to put in some physical effort and diligence to get great abs. But here's the good news: you stick to a sound diet—one low in simple carbs and saturated fats. Add cardio—to help strip off any adipose tissue covering your efforts—and soon going to be feeling as good as you're looking.

This book has everything you need to develop your own set of *Muscle & Fitness* cover-worthy abs. You just add a little hard work. I won't lie to you: it takes effort and diligence to get great abs. But here's the good news: once you start seeing results you'll be hooked on the process of getting them. The better they look, the more you'll want to work them.

Since my Muscle Beach incident, I decided to stop fighting my genetics and abandoning my quest to be massive. Instead, I set my sites on looking fit and proportioned. The goal became more Stallone than Schwarzenegger. These days I train my abs at the end of every workout, which means four to six times per week. I find it a good way to cool down and ease my way out of gym mode. Plus, to date, it's helped keep me from being mistaken for a 1980s football player again.



More Power to You,  
**Shawn Perine**  
Editor-in-Chief, *Muscle & Fitness*





# AB TRAINING

**Is your pursuit of great abdominals all over the map? Take the guesswork out of finding your own defined six-pack with these simple guidelines.**

**P**retend for a moment that your midsection is a map you're trying to navigate. You'd like to explore a number of different areas and regions, but you're not quite sure what's the best way to go about it. After all, when it comes to this terrain in particular, there are all sorts of conflicting opinions on how to navigate it most effectively and find the path to the ultimate six-pack. What you really need is the ab version of a high-tech GPS, something that will tell you how to arrive at your destination the quickest way possible. That's where *M&F* comes in. Think of this introductory chapter (and the rest of this book, for that matter) as your very own Abdominal Positioning System, telling you what areas to train, when to train them, and how—with no risk of making any wrong turns along the way.





## ROUTE 6 (PACK)

The four muscles that make up the abdominals are the rectus abdominis, the internal and external obliques, and the transverse abdominis. Without question, the best ab program is one that incorporates exercises that focus on all of these areas.

If you train abs more often than other body parts, you're not alone. Most people who give their abs the attention they deserve train them 3-5 times per week while working other major body parts (chest, back, legs) 1-3 times per week. Reason being, the abs are postural muscles that stay flexed for long periods to support the spine. As such, they have a higher percentage of slow-twitch muscle fibers than other body parts and therefore require more regular training for adequate stimulation.

The rep range you choose to work within is critical to how your abs develop (and show) when your body fat is low. Using your own body weight as resistance and keeping your reps between 15 and 30, for example, will help you maintain a flat and lean midsection, allowing your waist to appear smaller. If you feel you need to grow so you can see them better, you'll need to include weighted exercises using a cable station, a light weight plate or dumbbell to help build them up. Selecting exercises is easy—choose a total of four for each time you train abs, one for each of the different areas.

With ab training, timing is crucial: Always hit abs last in your workout. You don't want them to be fatigued before training other body parts such as back or legs because you want your abs and core to be strong and fresh to help sustain the intra-abdominal pressure necessary to protect your spine.

So let's look at each region of the abs, dissecting the anatomy, location, and function, as well as reviewing some of our favorite exercises to get the kind of washboard midsection you've always wanted.

### YOUR NEXT AB WORKOUT

The following sample routine hits all three regions of the midsection

EXERCISE	SETS	REPS
Weighted Hanging Knee Raise or Dumbbell Hip Thrust	2-3	12-15
Decline-Bench Cable Crunch	2-3	8-12
Decline Cable Twist	2-3	8-12
Weighted Plank	3	To failure*

\* Between sets, rest as long as the previous set lasted.



## REGION 1: RECTUS ABDOMINIS

Even though the six-pack looks like several individual muscles, the rectus abdominis is really only one. Running vertically from your sternum to your pelvis, the rectus is a thin sheath of muscle. While we'll discuss exercises for your upper and lower abs, note that they're all part of one muscle. That said, you can still emphasize the upper and lower portions of the rectus with specific movements.

The rectus abdominis is responsible for the standard crunching motion—moving your ribcage toward your pelvis. It also gets trained in the opposite direction, bringing your pelvis to your ribcage, which we refer to as a reverse crunching motion.

**>>Basic Exercises:** (Upper abs) crunch; (Lower abs) reverse crunch, hanging knee/leg raise

**>>Advanced Exercises:** (Upper abs) weighted crunch, machine crunch, decline bench cable crunch, kneeling cable crunch; (Lower abs) exercise-ball pull-in, dumbbell hip thrust, weighted hanging leg raise; (Upper and lower) double crunch

### DECLINE BENCH CABLE CRUNCH

Set an adjustable bench to a moderate decline and place it in front of a low-pulley cable with a rope attachment. Sit squarely on it, feet secured under the ankle pads. Lie back on the bench and grasp the ends of the rope with your hands at the sides of your head. Contract your abs to curl your body up to a point just short of perpendicular to the floor; try to avoid pulling through your hip flexors. Round your back as you rise to increase the abdominal contraction, then lower yourself under control back to the start position.

### DUMBBELL HIP THRUST

Lie faceup on the floor with your hands extended at your sides. Lift your feet so your legs are roughly perpendicular to the floor and place a dumbbell between your feet. (Due to the weight's placement above your body, use extra caution during this move to avoid injury.) Contract your abs to raise your hips and glutes straight up off the floor to push your feet toward the ceiling. Hold this position for a count before lowering your glutes back to the floor.

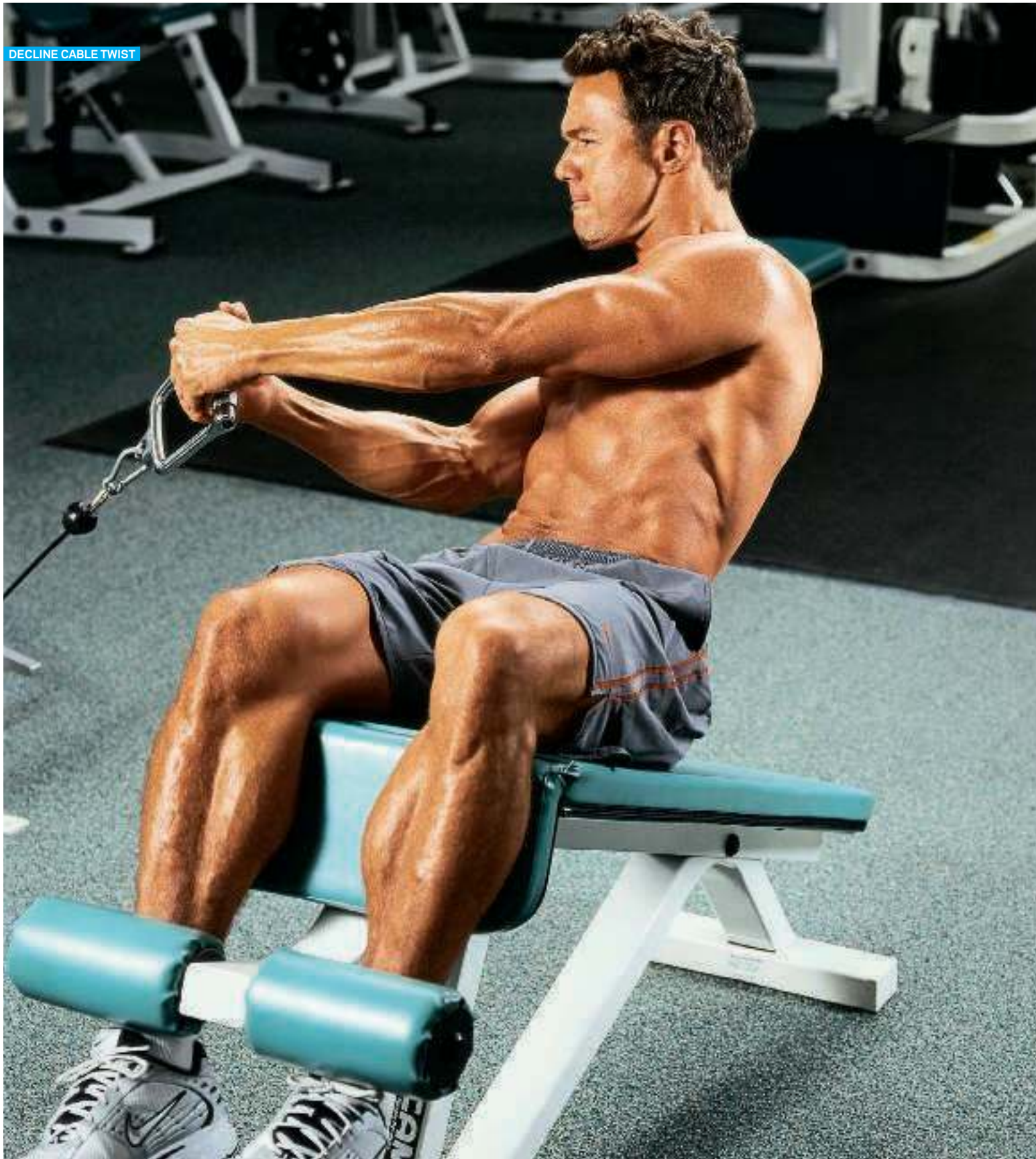
### WEIGHTED HANGING KNEE RAISE

Perform this exercise either hanging from a pull-up bar (using straps is an option) or on a vertical bench that supports your forearms. Hang at arm's length with an overhand grip, bending your knees 90 degrees and locking them in this position for the entire duration. Hold a medicine ball between your knees or a weight plate between your feet. Without swinging your body, contract your abs to bring your knees toward your chest (at least parallel to the floor) and lower under control, stopping at a complete stop at the bottom so as not to lose momentum as you go into the next rep.



WEIGHTED  
K

DECLINE CABLE TWIST





## REGIONS 2 & 3: INTERNAL & EXTERNAL OBLIQUES

The obliques are off to either side of the rectus abdominis and run diagonally from your lower ribs to near your hipbone. The external obliques are the ones you can see, as they're superficial to the internal obliques, which are hidden underneath. The internal and external fibers run in opposite directions. Both the internal and external obliques are responsible for torso rotation and lateral flexion of the torso.

>>**Basic Exercises:** Lying crossover crunch, oblique crunch, jackknife

>>**Advanced Exercises:** Oblique crunch on back-extension bench, standing oblique cable crunch, decline cable Russian twist

### DECLINE CABLE TWIST

Place a decline bench in front of a cable stack with a D-handle attached to the low-pulley cable.

Sit on the bench in a half situp position (your lower back shouldn't touch down) and hold the D-handle with both hands straight above you. With your feet locked in that position, rotate your torso to the right until your right arm is about parallel to the floor. Pause for a moment, return to the start, then rotate to the left side. That's one rep.





### REGION 4: **TRANSVERSE ABDOMINIS**

The transverse abdominis lies beneath the rectus abdominis, and whereas the rectus fibers run vertically, the transverse fibers run horizontally. The main function of the transverse abdominis is initiating abdominal compression during an intense exhale. You'll find this function very useful during core exercises such as the plank, where you need to keep your navel drawn in tight, as well as in moves such as the woodchop and Russian twist.

**>>Basic Exercises:** Woodchop, lying leg raise

**>>Advanced Exercises:** Exercise ball roll-out, weighted plank

#### **WEIGHTED PLANK**

Lie facedown on the floor with your body straight, arms extended in front of you. Have someone place a 25- to 45-pound plate on your lower back. Lift your body off the floor onto your elbows and forearms. Keep your abs pulled in tight and your back flat. Hold this position for 30 seconds to begin with, then work toward longer periods.

## WEIGHTED PLANK



### ABSOLUTELY GREAT TIPS

**>> FREQUENCY:** Abs can be trained from two to six days per week, depending on the load you place on them. For one workout to the next, a session with weighted ab moves might require more days of rest than one using strictly bodyweight exercises.

**>> VOLUME:** Depending on how many times per week you train, you should do two to four sets of the exercise. If you train twice a week, do four sets per exercise; if you do abs four times a week, do just two sets per exercise.

**>> TIMING:** Begin ab training with your weakest link. For most of us, this means the lower abs. If this is your weakest area, do exercises such as reverse crunches before moving on to your stronger areas. If obliques are your weakness, do oblique crunches first.

**>> LOAD/REPS:** Use varying degrees of resistance. Do weighted exercises to make your abs literally bigger and more pronounced, but also do higher-rep, lighter-weight exercises that stress endurance. Unweighted exercises should typically consist of 15-30 reps, while weighted exercises should be performed in the 8-12 range, which is the standard for muscle growth.

**>> WHEN:** Train abs after your weight session. Because the abs are so important for stability and spinal safety, it's critical not to get too fatigued before a rigorous workout, especially on back or leg days.

# 5 WEEKS TO WASHBOARD ABS

**A harder, more shredded midsection can be yours in just over a month with this training plan.**

**H**umans are creatures of habit, doing certain things over and over again because they feel comfortable, such as eating regularly at a favorite restaurant, driving the same route to work, or doing the same exercise, set, and rep schemes for a particular body part. Unfortunately, a bad habit is a big problem. Getting into a rut with any muscle group isn't good, but it's especially troublesome for abs. You don't need a Ph.D. in exercise physiology to know that a muscle grows bigger and stronger requires continually taxing it with heavier loads or more reps. Yet many of us often squeak by on a few sets of crunches tacked on to the end of a workout. The solution? Break the habit. 20 reps each, rest, and repeat.

This five-week program solves both problems, breaking you out of a rut and introducing progress to your middle-management plan in the form of the weights you use, reps you complete, and your rest periods between sets. Building well-defined abdominals doesn't happen by accident; it takes hard work and a carefully planned approach. Operating in a comfort zone may suffice in your personal and professional lives, but if you're after a ripped sixer, complacency is your enemy. Break the pattern right



## Slam-Dunk Guidelines

Our five-week plan requires you to train your midsection three times a week, resting at least 48 hours between sessions. If possible, do abs on days you're not training a major body part.

**>> Choose one Group A exercise.** This group includes one move for each of the major regions of the abdominals—upper abs, lower abs, and obliques. Group A exercises add resistance to your body weight, meaning they're the most challenging moves in the workout and should be done early when you're fresh. Since resistance levels can be manipulated one plate at a time, even beginner-level bodybuilders can perform these moves using a lighter weight.

The key to this exercise is to choose a weight with which you can do only 10 reps, to focus on building strength in your abs. If you can't complete 10, the weight's too heavy; conversely, if you can do more than 10, the weight's too light. Selecting the right resistance is critical to manipulating intensity during the program.

**>> Choose one Group B exercise.** These intermediate-level exercises are slightly easier than Group A moves. Some Group B movements use added resistance—again, manipulate loads to fit your needs if you're a beginner.

Like Group A, this group has one exercise dedicated to lower abs, one for upper abs, and one for obliques. Although you may want to alternate which area of the abs you focus on as you progress through a workout, it's not required. In fact, one way to prevent the abdominals from becoming accustomed to a particular mode of training is to keep changing up the order of the moves.

The key with the second exercise is to choose a level of difficulty (via resistance or body position) that enables you to complete exactly 15 reps. The higher rep target works the abs in a slightly different way than that of the Group A move, building the ridges and valleys that make up a taut midsection. Hence, choosing the right resistance is an important factor in allowing you to achieve the target rep goal.

**>> Choose a Group C exercise.** These are beginner-oriented body-weight-only moves, but if you've been training hard thus far, they'll still be challenging. Again, there's one exercise for upper abs, one for lower abs, and one for obliques, so the one you choose should be determined by which areas you've trained so far and what you want to focus on.

These moves turn up the fire even more by working in a higher rep zone. Aim for 20 reps per set; if that's too easy, we list ways to make them more difficult under each exercise description. At the higher rep range, your abs will feel the burn much sooner, as you train them in a slightly different manner to emphasize muscle endurance.

**>> Rest periods for ab training vary by individual, but start with a timed 60-second interval to determine if that's adequate.** The abdominals are a fairly small muscle group that recovers quickly and doesn't require the same amount of rest between sets as larger body parts do. You don't want them to recover fully before the next set.



**>> At your next ab-training session that week, select an exercise from each group you did not perform in the previous training session(s).** If you did the lower ab machine from Group A on Tuesday, pick one of the other two Group A moves on Thursday. On your last abdominal training day that week, perform the remaining exercise. This strategy ensures that all areas of your abs get worked first when your energy levels are highest and through all the training zones: heavy for 10 reps to focus on strength, moderate for 15 reps to build size, and with body-weight only for 20 reps to make the abs burn and build muscle endurance.

## The Next Level

We promised an ab workout that accounts for progression over time—that is, as your abs become stronger, you want to keep challenging them for continued progress. Here's how you'll do that in Week 2 and beyond:

**>> On all Group A moves, add one plate each week and still try to complete 10 reps per set.** Increasing the resistance weekly makes the abs work harder. If you can't do 10 reps, no problem—the key is to increase the weight and try to do as many reps as you can. This is why choosing the right weight in Week 1 is so important. Do this on all three sets for all Group A exercises.

**>> On Group B moves, reduce the rest period between sets by five seconds each week.** During Week 2, rest just 55 seconds between sets. The third week,

reduce the rest interval by another five seconds. Continue in this manner until you're resting only 45 seconds by the fifth week. Progressively limiting the rest period is another way to increase the intensity of your workout and make your abs stronger and more efficient. You're still trying to reach the 15-rep target on every set for Group B exercises.

**>> On Group C moves, perform one additional set each week, keeping the resistance and reps the same as in Week 1.** In the second week, do 21 reps instead of 20, and increase that by one rep each week. By the fifth week, you're doing 24 reps on every set for Group C exercises.

## Dial It In

While the keys that drive our five-week program are variety and progression, it would be a mistake to think that's all that's required to build washboard abs. Pay particular attention to your diet—monitor your carb and fat intake and total calories, and follow a smart supplementation program—while incorporating four 30-minute cardio sessions a week to strip away body fat. Only through a combination of these elements can you truly bring out a ripped six-pack.

At the end of five weeks, your abs will be more defined and improved—and the proof will be in the mirror as in your advancing strength. You can return to the program at a future date, but it's not intended to be followed indefinitely. Just make sure whatever you follow challenges you.



## DECLINE CRUNCH

### Target | Upper Abs

Set an adjustable bench to a moderate decline and sit squarely on it with your feet secured under the ankle pads. Cup your hands lightly behind your head and lean backward. Contract your abs to curl up to a point just short of perpendicular to the floor; try to avoid pulling through your hip flexors. Round your back as you rise to increase the abdominal contraction, then lower under control.

## PERFORMANCE POINTERS

**1)** Hold the peak contraction. By consciously squeezing and momentarily holding at the top of each rep, you'll work your abdominals harder and be less inclined to race through your repetitions.

**2)** Move at a smooth, deliberate pace. Use a slow, strict motion that increases the intensity of the contraction and minimizes momentum. Momentum

is created using fast, explosive motions, which reduce the quality of your workout and invite injury.

**3)** Exhale at the top of the move. Hold your breath until you have reached the peak-contracted position for a stronger, more intense contraction. Exhaling early reduces intra-abdominal pressure, so you won't be able to contract your abs as strongly.

**4)** Keep your head in line with your torso. When grasping your head to support it, don't interlock your fingers, which increases the likelihood you'll pull on your head and disrupt spinal alignment. Instead, lightly cup your fingers behind your head to support it.

**5)** Make sure the action is restricted to your waist. During most upper- and lower-abdominal moves, your spine flexes

(your lower back rounds), so keep your lower back as flat as possible, not arched, during the movements. Keep other joints stabilized.

**6)** The range of motion is fairly small in many abdominal moves. Bringing your shoulder blades off the floor in the basic crunch, for example, works the abs through a full range of motion. Don't rise as high as you would in a full situp—such motion doesn't further contract

or stimulate the abs but may increase hip flexor involvement when your feet are planted, such as in decline-bench crunches.

**7)** Maintain constant tension throughout the set. The ab muscles recover quickly, so if you rest between reps, even if for only a second, it becomes difficult to adequately fatigue the muscle. Maintain constant tension by stopping just short of the endpoint on the eccentric rep.

**8)** Take precise rest periods between sets. After you complete your set, rest about 30 seconds to let your muscles recover so you can complete your next set. If you start too early, they'll be fatigued and you won't reach your target reps.

# GROUP A: STRENGTH BUILDERS

>> Choose one of these three Group A exercises, which are considered advanced moves because you can add resistance simply by changing the pin on the weight stack. Be sure to fine-tune the resistance so you hit the target rep (10) by adding/subtracting weight. For your ab workouts later that same week, choose one of the other moves each time. (Note: If you're less advanced, simply use a lighter resistance with which you can complete the recommended number of sets and reps.)

**SETS + REPS** | Do three sets of 10 reps the first week. Over the course of the next five weeks, add one plate (about 10 pounds) each week (so that by Week 5 you've added four plates), still trying to reach 10 reps but doing as many as you can.



### DOUBLE CRUNCH MACHINE

#### Target | Upper & Lower Abs

Sit inside the machine with your back flat against the pad. Hook your feet under the ankle pads and secure the shoulder pads firmly over your upper torso. Grasp the handles with both hands. With your head in a neutral position, eyes focused forward, crunch your upper body forward while simultaneously lifting your torso toward your upper body. Hold the contraction, then return to the starting position. Don't allow the weights to touch down between reps to keep constant tension on your

### LYING CABLE CRUNCH

#### Target | Upper Abs

Lie faceup directly in front of a low-pulley cable with a rope attached, with your knees bent and feet flat on the floor. Grasp the rope with a neutral grip, placing your hands by your ears and locking your arms in this position for the duration of the set. Contract your abs to curl up as high as you can, squeezing at the top, then lower to just short of your shoulder blades resting on the floor between reps.





### **STANDING OBLIQUE CABLE CRUNCH**

**Target | Obliques**  
Stand about two feet away from a cable stack, your right shoulder facing the pulley. Attach a D-handle to the high cable and grasp it with an underhand grip, bending your arm about 90 degrees and locking it in this position for the duration of the set. Using your obliques, crunch down laterally as far as you can, holding the peak contraction briefly. Complete all reps for one side, then switch sides.



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