

The secret to tighter abs

Think you can't eat carbs and have a flat tum? We bust those belly myths and reveal what really helps you get a firmer core...

MYTH 1

YOU HAVE TO DO HUNDREDS OF STOMACH CRUNCHES TO GET ROCK-HARD ABS

BUSTED Knocking out 50 crunches a week to get that beach body? You may be doing more harm than good. They're notorious for bad technique - jutting your neck out as you curl up can create enormous strain. 'People often bash out a set with little thought given to form or time under tension,' explains Amy Tarr, founder of personal training company Giant Leap Training (giantleaptraining.com). 'This can lead to your hip flexors taking over, making them short and tight.' If you're going to do them, do them slowly. But if you're looking for a longer, leaner silhouette, try these oblique (your sides) exercises.

1 SIDE PLANK DIPS

Lie on your side with legs fully extended and weight supported by your forearm and palm resting on floor. Place one foot on top of the other and lift your body off the floor. Dip your hips down towards the floor, before lifting back up. Aim for 3 sets of 8.

2 CROSS BODY MOUNTAIN CLIMBERS

Begin in push-up position, with weight evenly distributed between your arms and heels. Engage core and draw your left knee as close to your right elbow as possible. Return to start and switch sides. Aim for 4 sets of 12.

3 WINDSHIELD WIPERS

Lie on your back and spread your arms at a 90° angle with your body. Raise your legs off the floor. Keep them together and rotate to the left, lowering towards, but not quite touching, the floor. Return to centre and repeat on the right. Aim for 4 sets of 12.



MYTH 2

TRAINING MY ABS CONTINUOUSLY WILL EVENTUALLY GIVE ME A SIX-PACK

BUSTED There's no point powering through planks if you still have a layer of fat surrounding your core. 'If your body fat is over 12%, your abs will stay hidden, no matter how developed your rectus abdominis muscle is,' explains Chris Richardson, co-founder of Zero Gravity Pilates (zerogravitypilates.co.uk). To shed this layer, you need to create a calorie deficit. Cut back on sugar, alcohol and refined carbs, eat a range of grains, fruit, vegetables and lean protein, and do at least 30 minutes of cardio exercise four times a week, including running, swimming, cycling or HIIT. But remember to give your body a break, too. 'If you train your abs intensely, they need rest to recover and regenerate,' says Chris. This will help them become stronger for your next session.

MYTH 3

YOU CAN'T EAT CARBS AND HAVE A FLAT TUM

BUSTED 'There's no one size fits all. Some people will react better to carbs than others,' says fitness writer and Fit at 40 campaigner James Crossley (mrjamescrossley.com). James suggests recording a food diary for three days. 'Most people will have a very high carb diet, so it might be time to limit your intake of calories and carbs, especially if you're trying to lose body fat.' But James believes any dietary changes need to be small and sustainable if you want to avoid piling the weight back on. 'Switch your pasta and white rice for brown rice and sweet potato or ditch sugary cereal for a couple of poached eggs and salmon.'

MYTH 4

SLOWER REPS ARE BETTER FOR TONING YOUR ABS

BUSTED Doing ab exercises at a slow, controlled pace is great, especially when doing sit-ups, but it's even better if you can mix up your rep speeds. 'Slow reps help you focus on the target muscle. However, fast reps use more muscle fibres, especially the external obliques (the ones that define your waist),' explains Chris. 'Start with slow, controlled reps, then finish off with faster pulses to get maximum activation and exhaust the muscle.'

That's clever!

Use an ab roller to target your core, suggests Chris. Get down on all fours and hold an ab roller out in front of you. Slowly roll the ab roller forwards, stretching your body into a straight position. Then roll back.

MYTH 5

IT WILL TAKE YEARS TO GET MY STOMACH IN SHAPE

BUSTED We all have abs, we just need to find them. Trainer Scott Laidler recommends taking up a full-body training regime - so that means mixing in cardio workouts as well as core-strength training, too - and you

should notice visual changes after about four weeks. He's also a big fan of Pilates. 'You'll experience a different relationship with your abdominal muscles than you've ever had before,' says Scott. 'Once you've established a connection with your ab muscles, you'll be more in control of your core and your stomach will appear flatter.'

SCOTT'S TOP TUMMY TONER? THE CORKSCREW

This is a great move for all your core muscles, particularly your obliques. Lie on your back, arms by your side, palms down and extend legs to the ceiling. Keeping legs together, lower them to the right, then circle down towards the floor as far as you can go, without straining your back. Then lift round to the left and back to the start. Repeat in the other direction.