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The world of crunches: Defining your abdominals

By The Icon Diet Reader

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So there I was, a gangly, ungainly guy standing in a giant aerobics studio surrounded by mirrors. Next to me on the floor was a fitness ball. I had never used a fitness ball, in fact I had never even heard of a fitness ball. None the less, there I was. My work out partner, in far better shape than I, was going to show me how to use the ball to make my ab routine more excruciatingly effective.

The whole premise of this heightened routine was to center around the crunch. For those of you who don't know what a crunch is, a crunch is like doing a sit up without actually sitting up. In fact, the whole motion of a crunch is to keep your abs constantly flexed. I had always thought that crunches were like doing push ups on you knees - a bit of a cop out. I was wrong.

The thing about your abs is that unlike other muscle groups they can take a lot. When you work your abs, it takes a lot to get them going. What is really different about abs is that they bulge in their relaxed state and are stretched thin when flexed. Think about your leg muscles for a second. Your quads bulge when you flex them. Abs are the other way around.

Getting myself on to the fitness ball was an exercise in patients. Having never used one before, it was awkward and it felt really odd. This is due in part to my rather uncoordinated nature, and yes I am a horrible dancer. What really made it difficult for me to position myself correctly on the ball was the fact the I was laughing hysterically. Being in the aerobics studio surrounded by mirrors, gave me multiple angles from which to watch my floundering.

Abs are largely responsible for holding you up. They are part of what is known as your core. Your core is what keeps you stable when standing, allows your body to twist at the waist, rise after bending over, and remain, well, upright. While there are other muscle groups involved with your core, abs have a special place in the eyes of the world. Defined abs are a sought after symbol of good health and fine physique.

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For the average person, getting setup on the ball, in proper position for crunches, is a relatively easy affair. It merely involves resting your hips and lower back on the ball while planting your feet squarely

on the floor. It's like slouching in a chair that has no back. Like I said, really no big deal - unless your me.

I finally nailed the proper setup and once the laughter subsided, I was ready to start. Like all exercises, form is critical. Crunches require very little motion. To begin, lean back as far as your balance allows. Place your hands on your temples with your elbows out. Focus on pushing your lower back into the ball and using your abs pull your shoulders up. In very real terms, you should only be raising your shoulders up about four inches. At the top of the crunch. Hold it for a two count and slowly let yourself back down slowly without disengaging your abs. Repeat. It's really a simple and effective exercise.

In my case, now firmly set up on the ball, I went at the crunches with gusto. Crunched until I simply could crunch no more. It is here that I would like to point out that you need not do this. You should work your abs in sets as with any other muscle baring in mind that you should do more then your average set. Aim for about three sets of fifty and go from there.

In my case, I woke up the next day smiling to myself about the difficulty I had getting used to the fitness ball, after all, it really was easy once I got the hang of it. I smiled as I recalled my impressive display of abdominal endurance. I smiled, and smiled right up until the time I tried to sit up.

The Icon Diet offers a step by step

to help people lose weight quickly, naturally and

effectively. Visit the site by going to...<http://www.zizzoo.com/guides/loseweight/index.php>

Waist Your Breath – Breathing For A Thinner Waist

By Nick Nilsson

The crunch exercise is the backbone of abdominal training. It develops the muscles of the abs to help you build that much–desired six–pack. But did you know that there is a way to do crunches that can actually decrease the size of your waist?

The key to this technique is the top position of the crunch where your abdominals are contracted as hard as they are able to.

When you're in this top position, I want you to breathe in and out slowly a few times. Try to relax every other muscle except the abs. This breathing in and out will intensify the contraction (as you will find out very rapidly).

Here's how it works:

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The muscles of the abdomen are arranged in layers around your midsection, similar in concept to the rings in a tree. While you are contracting the rectus abdominus (the top–most front layer of your abs, also known as your six–pack) continuously, the deeper abdominal muscle fibers are relaxing and contracting each time you breathe.

Each time the deep fibers relax, your rectus abdominus (because it is contracting so hard) will squeeze them in a little more, making your waist–area a little smaller and tighter.

The reason this works to decrease the size of your waist is simple. Usually, most people's abdominal muscles just kind of sit there. They don't stay tight, therefore your midsection tends to slouch forward and outward.

This technique teaches your abdominals to maintain a degree of tightness and tone in them even when you are relaxed. This keeps your abs in, leading to a visually smaller waist.

For more information on how to properly execute the Abdominal Crunch, go to

Nick Nilsson is Vice President of BetterU, Inc., an online exercise, fitness, and personal training company. Check out his latest eBook "The Best Exercises You've Never Heard Of" at

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