

Newsletter

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SIT-UPS

When done properly, sit-ups can strengthen and tone the abdominal muscles, which are otherwise hard to exercise. Since strong abdominal muscles provide better support for the back, strengthening these muscles may help prevent many back problems. In addition, strong abdominals give you more power for activities that involve the torso. These benefits occur only when sit-ups are done correctly.

Myths

- Sit-ups selectively burn fat deposits around the waist.
- The more sit-ups you do, and the faster you do them, the better.
- Hooking your feet under a piece of furniture when doing a sit-up helps you isolate your abdominal muscles.

For many people fighting fat the waist has become an obsession and most people eventually turn to sit-ups in this battle. But sit-ups aren't better than other types of exercise for trimming those love handles. Sit-ups, unlike running or other all-body exercise, don't burn many calories-and in any case, the energy burned by sit-ups comes from fat stores throughout the body, not just from the tummy.

Don'ts

- NO sitting up all the way. Lift only your head, shoulders and upper back off the floor, not your entire torso. This eliminates wasted movement and focuses on abdominal muscles. When you sit up all the way, much of the work is done by the hip flexor muscles (which lift your legs at the hip and usually get plenty of exercise) not the abdominals. The hip flexor muscles attach to the spine and can be a contributor to low back pain.
- NO straight legs. Skip those old-fashioned straight leg sit-ups, in which you keep your legs flat on the ground. These can make you overarch and strain your lower back. Straight leg sit-ups also stress the hip flexor muscles.
- NO excessive speed and repetitions. Forget about doing hundreds of rapid sit-ups. When you perform them quickly, momentum takes over to some extent as you bounce up and down. So rather than increasing the number of sit-ups you do in one workout (beyond 45 or so) make them more challenging by doing them more slowly, or try some variations.
- NO hooked feet. Don't do sit-ups with your feet hooked under a bar or piece of furniture-that lets the legs and hips do most of the work.

"Crunches"

1. Lie on the floor with your knees bent, several inches apart, and your feet flat (illustration A).
2. Contract your abdominal muscles while pressing your lower back into the floor, which will cause your upper body to lift up. Pressing your feet into the floor will also help.
3. Come up no more than 300 . Hold for a few seconds.
4. You can also place your hands behind your head or near your ears. Do not use your hands to pull your head up-that can cause neck strain and will reduce the work done by your abdominal muscles. Keep your neck relaxed.
5. Slowly lower your back to the ground.
6. To prevent arching, keep your lower back pressed into the ground while you are lifting and lowering yourself.
7. Beginners should start with three sets of five sit-ups, with a brief rest between sets. Do this three to five times a week. Gradually work up to three sets of 15 sit-ups. Remember, take them slow and easy - this is not a race.
8. Stop if you feel discomfort in your lower back.

Variations:

For a change of pace: Lie on the floor, place your legs on a low bench (illustration B) and do a crunch as described above.

Or you can try "reverse crunches" in which you move your legs not your torso: keeping your lower back pressed into the floor, your knees bent, and your feet off the floor, raise your hips slightly and bring your knees as close to your chest as possible.

The basic sit-up work all three abdominal muscle groups, but especially the rectus abdominus. To work the obliques (located toward the sides of the abdominal area) include a twist in any of the above exercises. As you sit up bring your right shoulder toward your left knee, then reverse sides.