

Getting the most benefit from ab exercises

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(HealthDay)—Men and women alike want defined abs. But you don't have to achieve a "six-pack"—the nickname for the three most visible pairs of abdominal muscles—to get the benefits of a stronger middle,

needed to support your back.

For a study sponsored by the American Council on Exercise (ACE), scientists from the University of Wisconsin, La Crosse, evaluated popular ab exercises to determine the best ones.

Popular Ab Strength Training Exercises

- Bicycle crunch
- Captain's chair crunch
- Classic crunch
- Decline bench curl-up
- Front plank
- Side plank
- Stability ball crunch
- Yoga boat pose

Of all these, the winner was the classic crunch. And it makes no difference whether you do crunches with arms folded across the chest or hands behind the head, researchers found. What does matter is using proper form.

Here's how ACE recommends doing crunches with hands behind your head:

Lie on your back, knees bent, feet flat on the floor between 12 and 18 inches from your rear. Press your elbows back to bring shoulder blades together without arching your lower back. Keep elbows in this position and keep your feet, tailbone and lower back in contact with the floor throughout the entire [exercise](#).

Exhale and engage your ab muscles. Tilt your chin up slightly as you slowly curl head, shoulders and upper back off the floor. (Try not to

tense your shoulders and neck as you bring your rib cage and pelvis together—the abs connect these two [body parts](#), so focus on them.) Hold briefly, then inhale and, with control, slowly lower to starting position.

Once you've mastered the crunch, add exercises that work other core muscles. For instance, the decline bench curl-up and captain's chair [crunch](#) engage muscles on the sides of the waist, while the plank works the [muscle](#) that helps stabilize the spine.

More information: The American Council on Exercise has a detailed [ab workout](#) designed to strengthen the entire core.

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