How To Get Sexy Abs

Table of Contents

Sexy is Healthy!

It's swimsuit time again! If you're like most Americans, you're probably worrying about how you would look in your 2-piece bikini or swimming trunks. Just so you do not feel isolated by your body consciousness, it is worth noting that a survey conducted by UCLA revealed that around 40% of men and around 50% of women are dissatisfied with their physique. Furthermore, a national survey conducted by a fitness club chain revealed that more than 70% of American men and women would rather go to the dentist, do their taxes, sit in the middle aisle of an airplane, or visit their in-laws rather than go swimsuit shopping!

Getting sexy abs, however, is not just for improving your physical attractiveness. In fact, more than just looking good in a swimsuit, it can improve your over-all health. The extra-fat we accumulate around our waistline, called visceral fat, is much worse for our health compared to the subcutaneous fat sitting under our skin. This type of fat has been correlated with inflammation and a higher risk for health problems such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and metabolic syndrome.

The Science Behind Belly Fat

After eating a meal, the body converts carbohydrates and proteins into glucose. Some of the glucose will immediately be used as fuel by the body. The rest of the glucose that had not been immediately burned will be stored in either of two forms: glycogen or triglycerides.

In response to elevated blood glucose levels, the pancreas releases insulin to convert and store the excess blood glucose into glycogen form.[1] The body will

only store just enough glycogen to support the body's functions for the day, which is roughly around 2000 calories.

Dietary fats, on the other hand, are stored as triglycerides. Dietary fats will always be stored as triglycerides as the body cannot convert them into glycogen. Aside from fats, insulin will also tell the body to synthesize triglycerides from the rest of the excess blood glucose which were derived from carbohydrates and proteins. An average man stores around 35000 calories of trigylcerides.

While most organs of the body are able to use glycogen and triglycerides as an energy source, the brain relies solely on glucose broken down from glycogen reserves. The brain cannot use triglycerides, especially the ones that were converted from dietary fat.

Insulin, likewise, is responsible for telling the body to store the triglycerides into our fat tissues, also called adipose. Granted that these triglycerides get stored in our fat tissues, why then do they seem to get localized in our bellies?

The localization of fat in our bellies is a combination of the effects of aging and hormonal changes, specifically changes in levels of estrogen, cortisol, and insulin.

As we age, estrogen has a tendency to become more dominant over other hormones such as progesterone in women, and testosterone in men. The belly happens to have a lot of estrogen-sensitive tissues, including estrogen-sensitive fat tissues. Estrogen promotes the growth of these estrogen-sensitive tissues leading to an increased size of adipose or fat tissues in the waist and belly.

too much stress, likewise, leads to excess production of the stress hormone called cortisol. While a normal range of cortisol is important for a lot of dynamic processes in the body, excessive cortisol can lead to hormonal-receptor resistance, including insulin resistance. When insulin receptors become less sensitive due to high levels of cortisol, it would take higher amounts of insulin to drive glucose into the cells. High insulin and high cortisol levels will cause the body to store more fat instead of burning them.

The Dangers of Belly Fat

Belly fat is interchangeably called visceral fat, omentum or intra-abdominal adiposity. Visceral fat is located inside the belly underneath the muscles in your stomach. Because this fat is very close to your organs, it is their primary source of energy.

Aside from this, fat released from the belly area travels rapidly and constantly to the liver. The processed material is shipped to the arteries where it has been linked to high levels of LDL cholesterol, also known as bad cholesterol.

It is for these reasons that belly fat is considered more dangerous than subcutaneous fat, that is, the fat that lies just beneath the skin's surface. Subcutaneous fat does not supply energy to your vital internal organs nor does it affect the blood supply to these organs. Fat around the waist has been linked to a greater risk of heart disease, diabetes, stroke, hypertension, breathing problems, disability, some cancers, and higher mortality rates.

You can find out for yourself if your waistline is in the danger zone. For women, a waist size that is greater than 35 inches, and for men, a waist size that is greater than 40 inches, have been significantly correlated to higher mortality

among heart patients. You may also measure your waist-to-hip ratio. Use a measuring tape to measure the circumference of your waist, usually just above the belly button. Then, measure the circumference of your hips at the widest part of your buttocks. Divide your waist measurement by your hip measurement, and the answer would be your waist-to-hip ratio. A ratio higher than 8.0 indicates an increased risk for the chronic illnesses mentioned above.[i]

So, now that you know the health consequences of being out of shape, let's start working on shrinking that belly fat and getting six-pack abs in time for the summer. We will be trimming the fat through cardio exercises and fat-burning diets, as well as building up muscle mass through strength training.

High Intensity Interval Cardio Training

For those determined to burn their belly fat, here's one encouraging information. Belly fat is the first type of fat that you tend to lose when you are trying to lose weight. This is true even if your general body shape is pear-shaped or apple-shaped. When you lose weight, you will most likely lose proportionately more fat from the abdominal region than elsewhere. The reason for this is because visceral fat is more metabolically active and easier to lose than subcutaneous fat.

But what type of exercise is the best for burning fat? While it might seem logical to focus on abdominal exercises if you want to lose belly fat, crunches and other spot abdominal exercises are not at all effective in banishing belly fat.

The best type of exercise for fat loss is high intensity interval cardio training (HIIT). This type of exercise is better than cardio exercises which you perform at the same pace during the whole exercise session, such as continuous walking for 30 minutes. Steady, low-intensity exercises tend to place the body in a steady

state, that is, the body adjusts to your speed and tries to conserve calories. Interval training enables you to avoid this steady state, which allows you to burn more calories and fat.

Here's a sample high intensity interval training routine that you can follow:

1. Run at medium pace for 3 minutes.
2. Run at a fast pace for 1 minute.
3. Walk fast for 3 minutes.
4. Sprint for 1 minute.
5. Run at medium pace for 2 minutes.
6. Fast-pace running for 1 minute.
7. Walk for 3 minutes.

In a span of approximately 15 minutes, you would be able to burn the calories needed to lose overall body fat, including belly fat. This routine is ideally performed three times a week.

You may also use cardio machines such as treadmills or elliptical trainers. Start off at an easy, comfortable pace for 5 minutes. Then, take up the intensity on the machine and go as hard and fast as you possibly can for 1 minute. Afterwards, bring it back down for a minute or two, or however long it takes you to recover enough to do it again. The important thing is to keep changing your speed and intensity level every 2 minutes or so. Your body will be burning more calories because it is unable to achieve a steady state. Depending on your fitness level, you may do this routine 3-4 times a week with each session lasting from 30-45 minutes. The great thing about cardio exercises is that they speed up your metabolism for 4-8 hours after you stop exercising.

Strength Training: Build More Muscle Mass

One effect of aging on our bodies is that we gradually lose muscle mass. Less muscle mass means our bodies would have a reduced rate of using up calories. To counter this effect, we need to do strength training or weight bearing exercises. This type of exercise builds muscle mass, which will increase our metabolism and help burn off extra fat.

The best strength training techniques are the ones that make the best use of the body's muscle building hormones. We have two types of hormones in relation to muscle building: Anabolic hormones build muscle, and catabolic hormones tear down muscles. The most powerful anabolic hormone is testosterone, followed by growth hormone and insulin. Since men have more testosterone than women, they do have an advantage when it comes to building muscle and losing belly fat. But, women tend to have more of the other types of anabolic hormones.

Catabolic hormones such as cortisol direct your body to break down muscle for fuel. In other words, your body eats your own muscle. To avoid this, your strength training workouts should increase the rate of release of your anabolic hormones relative to the release of your catabolic hormones. You can do this by increasing the intensity of your workout. The higher the intensity of your workout, the more you stimulate your endocrine system to release anabolic hormones and other muscle-building and fat-burning hormones.

You can increase the intensity of your strength-training workout by lifting heavier weights. The more muscle fibers you can recruit, the more muscle-building and fat-burning hormones you will release.

You should also emphasize workouts that make use of compound movements, that is, exercises that work multiple muscle groups. Compound muscle exercises engage the most amount of muscle tissue for building more muscles as compared to any other type of exercise.

Strength Training Workout Schedule

The following is a sample compound exercise workout schedule:

Monday – Chest and Triceps

Chest Exercises:

- Barbell Bench Press 4 sets 12 reps
- Incline Dumbbell Bench Press 4 sets 10 reps

Triceps Exercises:

- Close Grip Bench Press 4 sets 8 reps
- Dips 4 sets Maximum

Tuesday – Legs and Abs

Legs Exercises:

- Deep Squats 4 sets 12, 10, 8, 6
- Stiff Legged Deadlifts 4 sets 12, 10, 8, 6
- Dumbbell Lunges 4 sets 8 each leg

Abs Exercises:

- Lying Floor Leg Raise w/ Crunch 5 sets 20 reps

Wednesday – Rest Day

Thursday – Back and Biceps

Back Exercises:

- Wide Grip Pull-up * 4 sets 12 reps
- Chin Ups 4 sets 10 reps
- Bent Over Barbell Rows 4 sets 12 reps
- Cable row 4 sets 10 reps

*Pull-up reps may be completed with negatives, that is, jump up and lower yourself down slowly. You may also use Lat Pull Down in place of pull-ups.

Friday – Shoulders, Traps and Abs

Shoulders/traps Exercises:

- Military Press 4 sets 12, 10, 8, 6
- Alternate Arm Seated Dumbbell Press 4 sets 10 reps
- Shrugs 4 sets 8 reps
- Upright Rows 4 sets 12 reps
- Bicycle Floor Ab Crunch 5 sets 20 reps

Saturday and Sunday – Rest Days

With regards to rest periods in between sets, there are studies that show that compared to workouts with 3-minute rest periods, workouts with 1-minute rest periods have nearly double the metabolic rate. Furthermore, research results showed that resting between sets for 1 minute or less provided a metabolic burn that lasted well beyond 24 hours. It is believed that these effects on metabolism were brought about by a faster heart rate, faster energy turnover, and greater hormone release. It is very important, however, to listen to the needs of your

body and to rest longer when you deem it necessary. If you start feeling nauseous and dizzy, these might be signs that you have dropped your rest periods far too quickly.

One strategy for keeping your rest periods short is to use supersets. With supersets, you move from one exercise to another with minimal rest in between. Instead of performing the same set of exercise, you alternate exercise sets for opposing muscle groups.

Another tip for keeping rest periods short is to avoid socializing while working out. It's easy to get distracted about time when you're talking. You might also want to wear a watch or keep an eye on the clock so you can measure your rest periods.

Lastly, over-doing your workout is counter-productive. Strength training workouts should last no longer than an hour. If you overexert yourself, you will just increase the release of the catabolic hormone, cortisol, and break up more muscle than what you build.

Foods That Burn Belly Fat

After performing high intensity interval training and strength training exercises, the last essential part of a program for burning belly fat is a fat-burning diet. There have been a number of foods that have been shown to help in burning belly fat, as well as help in general weight loss programs. These foods can be categorized as follows: high protein foods, high fiber foods, foods rich in good fats, and foods that contain specific fat-burning elements.

High Protein Foods

Protein is useful in helping the body burn fat. It costs a lot of energy to metabolize proteins. The liver needs to take them apart and reassemble them so they can be used somewhere else in the body. A high protein meal can increase your metabolic rate by 30 percent for as long as 12 hours at a time, which can be the equivalent of a three- to five-mile jog.

Furthermore, proteins are made up of amino acids, which are the building blocks of muscles. Consequently, these building blocks are recruited for building muscle mass, such as the ones you develop during strength training. And, as discussed earlier, the more muscle mass you have, the more effective your cardiovascular exercises would be in burning fat.

Protein foods that burn up the most amount of energy during digestion include lean protein from the following:

- Chicken breast
- Turkey breast
- Game meats (venison, elk, etc.)
- Bison, buffalo
- Very lean red meat such as top round and lean sirloin (grass-fed beef are especially nutritious)
- Almost all types of fish
- Shell-fish and other seafood
- Egg whites (whole eggs in moderation)
- Whey protein and soy protein[ii]

High Fiber Foods

Fiber comes in two forms: soluble and insoluble. Soluble fiber absorbs water during digestion and forms a jelly-like consistency, making us feel fuller faster. The gummy gel traps nutrients inside, including dietary sugars like carbohydrates and starch. As a consequence, sugar is absorbed into the bloodstream more slowly, blunting sharp spikes in blood glucose levels. This improves insulin sensitivity, avoiding unnecessary storage of glucose as fats.

Foods rich in soluble fiber are usually the same foods considered to have a low glycemic index (GI), a ranking system for different carbohydrates based on their effect on blood glucose levels. The GI ranking of foods, however, vary depending on the kind of food, its ripeness, the length of storage, and how it was cooked. Nevertheless, GI values can be used as further proof for the health benefits that can be derived from consuming foods high in soluble fiber.

Insoluble fiber, as the name implies, does not dissolve in water. This type of fiber is also known as roughage. Even if it does not dissolve in water, it can absorb water causing an increase in fiber bulk. These bulk agents help clear the gastrointestinal tract of waste and toxins. As insoluble fibers are only partially digested, this would also mean a reduced amount of calories being taken up by the intestine and possible weight and fat loss.

Good sources of soluble fiber are as follows:[iii]

- Fruits
- Vegetables
- Nuts and seeds
- Oatmeal
- Beans

Foods rich in insoluble fiber include the following:

- Fruit and vegetable skins
- Whole wheat grains
- Nuts and seeds

Good Fats That Burn Bad Fats

People used to believe that eating fats makes them more fat. Recent studies, however, have revealed that consuming healthy fats could actually help people lose weight, as well as gain other health benefits.

Essential fatty acids are polyunsaturated fats that need to be included in our diets because our bodies cannot synthesize them. They are necessary for maintaining all of our cell membranes and for making prostaglandins which regulate many body processes. One essential fatty acid, alpha-linoleic acid, also known as Omega 3 fatty acid, has been found to have an important role in the fat burning process. It is required even in states of fasting because it can help burn more fat.

Good sources of Omega 3 fatty acids are the following:

- flaxseeds
- mustard seeds
- pumpkin seeds
- soya bean
- walnut oil
- green leafy vegetables
- grains
- Spirulina
- linseed (oils from flaxseed)

Another example of a healthy fat is monounsaturated fat or MUFA. This type of fat has been linked to increased basal metabolic rate that allows the body to burn fat faster. Eating a source of MUFA with each meal helps the body burn fat in the stomach area. Good sources of MUFA are the following:

- Olive oil
- Rapeseed oil
- Hazelnuts
- Almonds
- Brazil nuts
- Cashews
- Avocado
- Sesame seeds
- Pumpkin seeds
- Peanuts[iv]
- Canola oil

You've probably heard of the many ill effects of trans fat on the body. Trans fats are created through the addition of hydrogen atoms into liquid fats making them into solid fats. They have been determined to increase bad cholesterol, also

known as low density lipoprotein (LDL), and to reduce good cholesterol, or high density lipoprotein (HDL). This type of fat has been significantly correlated to obesity, various cancers, heart disease and other illnesses.

What is not widely known is that there is a type of naturally occurring trans fat that can actually stimulate fat loss and help to create lean muscle. This fat is found naturally in the meat and milk of grass-fed animals such as bison, kangaroo, goats, cattle, sheep and venison. It is called conjugated linoleic acid (CLA).

You must, however, take CLA in its natural form, that is, from grass-fed beef. CLA supplements are not the same as the CLA found in animals and will not provide the same health benefits. [v]

One last type of fat that has been recently associated with fat-burning is medium chain triglyceride. Medium chain triglycerides are primarily processed from coconut oil. They have long been used for helping people who have trouble in digesting fats.

Conventional fats are long chain triglycerides made up of a string of 16 or more carbon atoms. Medium chain triglycerides, on the other hand, are made up of a much shorter chain of only 6 to 12 carbon atoms. Because of its short carbon chain, medium chain triglycerides are digested and metabolized very rapidly compared to regular fats. They are minimally stored as body fat. Mostly, they are transported directly to cells to be burned for energy. They are burned so quickly that their calories are essentially turned into heat. This process of thermogenesis boosts up our metabolic rate which leads us to burn more calories.

Aside from enhancing our metabolism, medium chain triglycerides are also effective in suppressing the appetite. They have been found to improve the long-term success of diet therapy of obese patients.

Fat-Burning Elements in Specific Foods

There are some foods that have specific elements that can increase our metabolism.

- **Capsaicin in hot pepper** has a thermogenic effect. A tolerable dose of hot pepper can increase our metabolism by 21 calories.

- **Green tea extract** has been found to increase metabolism by an average of 79 calories in a 24-hour period.

- **Cinnamon**, at about half a teaspoon per day, has been found to modulate blood sugar levels and to lower bad cholesterol levels.

- Other spicy foods such as cardamom, cloves, curry and ginger have also been cited for their ability to boost metabolism and burn body fat.

Lose Fat By Scheduling Meals

It is also worth mentioning that our eating schedule has a considerable impact on our metabolism. The ideal amount of time in between meals is three hours. If you eat more often, you risk gaining weight. If you eat less often, you might experience hunger pains, cravings and a slowing down of metabolism. Eat five-to-six smaller meals each day. This means eating breakfast, lunch and dinner, plus two snacks in between. Just remember to stay within your calorie range.

Summary

In summary, the most effective way to get sexy abs is to combine cardio exercises with strength training exercises and to include high protein, high fiber and beneficial fats into your diet. Not only will you have increased confidence to put on a swimsuit, you will also be doing your health a wealth of good!

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[i] http://www.healthcalculators.org/calculators/waist_hip.asp
[ii] http://www.build-muscle-and-burn-fat.com/list-of-high-protein-foods-top-5.html
[iii] http://www.suite101.com/content/how-fiber-helps-weight-loss-a107248
[iv] http://www.cookinglight.com/eating-smart/nutrition-101/monounsaturated-fats-00400000001470/