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The Only Good Crunch

Seldom has so much effort been expended for so little result as thousands of people in gyms and health clubs across North America endure yet another punishing session doing the exercise everyone loves to hate. The abdominal crunch may be a fitness staple, but at the end of the day too many of us still struggle to do up our jeans. Visibly delineated abs set off by a taut flat stomach typically require less than 10 per cent overall body fat to attract pin-up status – you must be lean if you want results that can be seen.

Which isn't to say that a properly executed crunch isn't an effective method for strengthening and toning the notoriously resistant gut. Three major muscle groups make up the abdominal muscles — rectus abdominus, the infamous six-pack, which is more accurately divided into eight sections; the external and internal obliques, which flank the rectus abdominus on either side and span the area from the rib cage to the pelvis and the almost invisible muscle beneath them called transverse abdominus.



As often as crunches are performed is a pretty good measure of how often they're performed incorrectly. Poor technique significantly increases the chance of injury and produces none of the desired results.

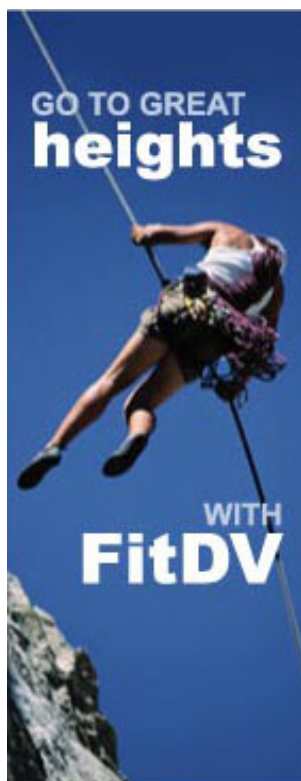
"Crunches are important — if they're performed with correct technique. They become very effective when added to an exercise program that involves aerobic conditioning and sound nutritional choices on almost a daily basis," says Michael Wood, director of the Sports Performance Group of Westwood, Massachusetts and a former conditioning coach at the University of Connecticut.

According to Wood, abdominal devices can be helpful.

"But what usually occurs is someone who is already doing crunches with incorrect technique transfers that inefficiency over to an abdominal device. The exercise ball, for example, can be extremely effective. When you're lying on a ball you've gone from a stable floor to an unstable surface and this will dramatically affect the level of difficulty."

The most common mistake people make when doing crunches is to both recruit and rely on momentum.

"Most people will try to get as many reps in as fast as possible. Slow down the movement and



think of ‘peeling’ your head, shoulders and one vertebrae at a time off the floor or stability ball,” says Wood.

He advises viewing crunches from an informed anatomical perspective.

“When doing situps, crunches or abdominal stabilizing exercises, you have to be taught how to correctly draw in the transverse abdominus and also perform a posterior pelvic tilt, (flattening the natural curve of the lower back into the floor). The pelvis will actually rotate posteriorly about 10 degrees and when you subsequently lift your shoulder blades off the floor the abdominal muscles are fully activated and worked more efficiently.”

Tips for Performing Safe and Effective Crunches:

Michael Wood, (website: www.woodspg.com) recommends the following:

- Perform basic movements before attempting more advanced variations.
- Work the torso, or core, after warming up, when you’re sweating and before you do your workout. The core has 29 muscles comprising the abdominal, lower back and hip area. “You need to develop core strength before extremity strength,” says Wood.
- Don’t put hands behind your head. Place them across your chest or on either side of your head.
- Eliminate momentum.
- Breathe – exhale up, inhale down.
- Work the core using four movements: flexion, lateral flexion, rotation and stabilization.
- Focus on functionality. “Life and sport are multi-directional and involve more than one plane of motion. So when you’re working your core, use flexion with rotation type movements rather than just straight flexion,” says Wood.
- Work this area three to four times a week, not every day

“You’ll get the best results,” says Wood, “when you realize that in addition to core work, aerobic conditioning and what you put into your body are the keys — not how many crunches you can do.”



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