



## **All I Want for the Holidays: "Six-Pack" Abs**

### **Proper Form Necessary to Avoid Injury and Achieve that Perfect Midwinter Midriff**

ALEXANDRIA, VA. Between the drive to deflate the holiday spare tire and the desire to get swimsuit-trim for that winter Caribbean cruise, gyms and health clubs are currently overflowing with would-be athletes performing dozens of crunches in pursuit of the coveted "six-pack" of abdominal muscles.

### **Proper Form Key To Reducing Injury Risk**

But while exercise is certainly preferable to the sofa-bound lifestyle, the American Physical Therapy Association (APTA) says that people who fail to use proper form while performing abdominal exercises run the risk of injury.

"A lot of people who have been sedentary all year rush into the gym prior to the holiday season," said APTA member Lori Thein Brody, MS, PT, SCS, ATC, Senior Clinical Specialist with the University of Wisconsin Clinics Research Park in Madison, WI. "They're in a big hurry to get trim, and they don't always take the time to make sure they are exercising properly. People need to realize that there's a right way and a wrong way to work out the abs."

"At best, doing abdominal exercises improperly or with incorrect form can result in an inefficient and non-productive workout; at worst it may put novice exercisers at risk of injury," said Ms. Brody. "To prevent injuries, it is necessary to have a correct body position throughout the entire range of motion for an exercise. It is also important that the body's muscles and tendons possess adequate strength, endurance, and flexibility to maintain this proper technique from start to finish."

### **Ring in the New Year with Flatter Abs**

The crunch is a classic way to tighten the tummy because it specifically targets the muscles in the abdomen. Unlike a traditional sit-up, where the abdominal muscles are assisted by the hip muscles, the crunch emphasizes the abs for maximum effect. For people with back problems, physical therapists recommend a curl-up. This exercise is done by starting with the arms at the sides and slowly curling up, beginning with the head and neck, raising up until the shoulder blades leave the floor. Once the crunch has been mastered, consider the "Plank," an effective exercise for flattening the abdominal wall. This exercise is performed with the stomach toward the floor and the body extended. With the individual balanced on the elbows and balls of the feet, the plank strengthens the abdominal muscles by stabilizing the trunk/spine. The plank not only works the abdominal muscles, but also improves the strength of the back and gluteal muscles. However, it is important to work up to this high-level activity over time. Begin by holding the position a few seconds and gradually extend to one-minute intervals.

Ms. Brody recommends exhaling during contraction and inhaling while relaxing the abdominal muscles, always maintaining focus on the muscles being exercised. To determine the body's readiness and fitness level, work with a physical therapist before embarking on

any new exercise program. Often you can find a physical therapist who is affiliated with a local gym or wellness center and who may hold office hours or special seminars during the week.

"People need to view fitness as a journey and not a destination," continued Ms. Brody. "Going into a gym and expecting to look like a magazine cover model in two or three weeks is unrealistic, and can make people overdo their workout. The key is to assess your current fitness level and match the exercises to that level, go slowly and realize that results will come with time and consistent effort." With the proper technique and a little perseverance, even the most dedicated couch potato can work toward a holiday six-pack that will last all year long.

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