

ABDOMINAL HITS AND MYTHS

Don't get bogged down in the minefield of six-pack misinformation. Here's the skinny on midsection mythology

1. The quickest way to lose the fat covering your abs is to not eat.

MYTH

This plunges your body into panic mode, causing it to conserve calories rather than burn them. It's a survival mechanism and makes you hold on to fat reserves to protect against starvation. "For stable weight loss, eat 2,500 calories a day spread between five to six small meals," says personal trainer Mark Raynsford (markspt.co.uk).

2. Sit-ups fix back pain.

HIT

Back pain comes from weak muscles in your trunk. Research by the US Army found that out of 120 soldiers, the 29 men who could do the most sit-ups (73 in two minutes) were five times less likely to suffer lower-back injuries than the 31 guys who could barely muster 50. Hop to it, soldier, and give back pain its marching orders.

3. Cranking out 250 sit-ups a day builds abs.

MYTH

Despite what the late-night infomercials claim, a study by the American College of Sports Medicine found that you can't lose weight in a specific area by targeting it with resistance exercises, such as sit-ups. Hundreds of sit-ups are just a waste of your time.

4. For tighter abs, you should run as much as possible.

MYTH

This is a throwback to the Eighties. Every pound of muscle you add burns an additional 50 calories a day. That means you'll fry more energy even when you loaf on the couch. "Do weights circuits for the fastest muscle-building and fat-burning results," advises Raynsford.

5. Resistance-training exercises build abs.

HIT

If you're not doing squats for your legs, consider using them to build your midsection. Canadian researchers found that squats work your core harder than many ab and lower-back exercises. Although squatting with the heaviest weights stimulated the most muscle, even light warm-up sets targeted the abs intensely.

6. You can be overweight and still have abs.

MYTH

Your body fat needs to be lower than 12 per cent for your abs to start making guest appearances. The fastest way to lower your body fat is through a good diet packed with plenty of muscle-building protein such as eggs, fish and chicken. DT