

The A.B.C.'s of Abs

Great Abdominal Exercises

abs_n. Pl. Abbreviation for abdominal muscles or movements; common slang used by athletes (espec. swimmers) describing anatomical features relative to the torso. ie: "He has abs of steel!"; the daily abdominal routine. Eg: "You should do abs everyday;" covetous term for the defined washboard stomach. Eg: "Great abs!" antonyms incl. (Slang) "gut," "spare tire," "love handle" and "beer belly."

Abdominal strength is essential to fast swimming. Strong abs allow the swimmer to step-up and control proper body position, leading ultimately to more efficient swimming. Abs also contribute to faster starts and turns.

Unfortunately, abs are typically overlooked (and avoided) by Masters swimmers. Because Masters swimmers frequently focus on propulsion (arms & legs), abs are forgotten and because ab routines are often painful and boring, they are avoided.

The following "Great Abdominal Exercises" are part of a daily routine designed to help swimmers work their abdominal muscles with a variety of movements. This variety contributes to each muscle group and helps keep the daily routine interesting.

Abdominal exercise technique is as simple as "A. B. C."

A. abdominal muscle contraction; B. body position; and, C. control.

The abs should always be the focus. All movement is centered around the mid-section, with a repeating cycle of alternating contractions and releases. Careful attention to body position helps maintain the focus (on the abs) while determining what muscles are working. Controlling the movement and the breathing adds an extra dimension of quality to the exercise to keep the contractions and releases at an even pace, exhale while contracting and inhale while releasing. The goal is quality, not quantity.

Helpful Hints

Find a soft, carpeted floor or a gymnastics mat. If you're at the pool, use folded towels for padding. Avoid doing abs on a hard surface without padding. Start slowly and gradually increase the repetitions. Build to 10-15 minutes every day. In the beginning, it's common to experience some muscle pain. Should an exercise cause joint pain, discontinue immediately.

Here is a collection of abdominal strengthening exercises learned from swimmers, coaches, body builders and aerobics instructors:

Allabs : Laying face-down with arms extended above the head, lift chest and lower rib cage off floor. You may wish to have a partner hold down your feet.
(Beginners: 10-15 reps. Intermediate: 20-30 reps. Advanced: 50+ reps.)

Belly-Ups : Laying face-up with hands on the belly, lift shoulders and lower back off floor. (Beginners: 10 reps. Intermediate: 50 reps. Advanced: 100+ reps.)

Crunches: Laying face-up, with bent knees, ankles crossed and feet off the floor, place hands behind the head and lift chest toward thighs.
(Beginners: 10 reps. Intermediate: 50 reps. Advanced: 100+ reps.)

Double-Leg Pikes: Laying face-up with arms extended above the head, simultaneously lift arms, torso and both legs. Reach for toes while keeping legs straight.
(Beginners: 5-10 reps. Intermediate: 15-20 reps. Advanced: 25-50 reps.)

Single-Leg Pikes: Just like "Double-Leg Pikes," but lift one leg at a time, alternating.
(Beginners: 10 reps. Intermediate: 25 reps. Advanced: 50+ reps.)

Bicycles: Laying face-up with knees bent and feet on the floor, clasp hands behind head and move legs in pedalling motion (alternating) while twisting the body so the leading elbow meets the opposite knee (and repeat, rotating).
(Beginners: 25 rotations. Intermediate: 50 rotations. Advanced: 100+ rotations.)

Standard Leg-Lifts: Laying face-up with legs together and arms at the sides, raise legs together (four inches off the floor) and hold for 15 seconds.
(Beginners: five reps. Intermediate: 10 reps. Advanced: 25+ reps.)

Hell Raisers: Laying on side, legs together, bottom arm extended on floor, place upper hand behind the head, raise and bend legs, and crunch (touching the upper elbow to the upper knee). Make sure to keep legs off the floor at all points.
(Beginners: 10-15 reps./side. Intermediate: 20-30 reps./side. Advanced: 30-40 reps./side.)

Chucks: Laying face-up with knees bent and feet on the floor, cross-over one leg so the ankle rests on the opposite knee. Place hands behind head and lift back while twisting (the leading elbow should meet the opposite knee).
(Beginners: 10 reps./side. Intermediate: 25 reps./side. Advanced: 50+ reps./side.)

Supermans: Laying face-down with legs together and arms extended above the head raise arms and legs, holding for 15 seconds.
(Beginners: five reps. Intermediate: 10 reps. Advanced: 25+ reps.)

Row-Boats: In a seated position, with bent legs raised slightly and arms crossed over chest, lean back (resting only on the buttocks) while straightening legs and body. Return to starting position and continue. The movement should be similar to rowing.
(Beginners: 5-10 reps. Intermediate: 15-20 reps. Advanced: 30-40 reps.)

Scissors: Laying face-up with arms at the sides, lift legs slightly off the ground and begin a rapid, alternating motion of separating and crossing the legs.
(Beginners: 10 reps. Intermediate: 25 reps. Advanced: 50+ reps.)

Thrusters: Resting on upper back and shoulders, with legs raised and arms extended on the floor (to brace body), thrust both legs straight up, and release.
(Beginners: 10 reps. Intermediate: 25 reps. Advanced: 50+ reps.)