

Ab Training Exercises

The three tasks that the abdominal muscle group is responsible for are lowering the ribcage toward the pelvis, raising the pelvis toward the ribcage, and providing rotational and organ support. This article focuses on explanations for exercises that cover these three movement pathways.

Ribcage Toward Pelvis

Crunches – The crunch is a solid fundamental abdominal exercise. However, it doesn't mean that most people perform it correctly. One of the best ways to crunch properly is to lie down on the ground and bend your legs around 90 degrees at the knee with your feet on the floor. Place your hands behind the base of your head but be sure not to yank on your head or neck at all. Using your abdominals (not your legs, hips, or glutes), squeeze your lower back into the ground and then start to roll your ribcage toward your hips until your shoulder blades are just barely on the floor. Your head should be facing the ceiling (nose high). This is the start position of a proper crunch.

From this starting point, slowly roll your ribcage toward your pelvis, exhaling as you contract your abs. Squeeze briefly at the top and then slowly roll your ribcage back down toward the ground until your shoulder blades just touch the ground and then immediately repeat rolling up for the next repetition. The total range of motion of your abdominals is only about 30 degrees from the floor, so don't sit all the way up and touch your knees with your elbows (this will cause potential injury to your lower back)

Pelvis Toward Ribcage

Reverse Crunches – A reverse crunch starts in just about the same position as a crunch. It's called reverse, because instead of your shoulders coming off the ground, your legs will come off the ground. Lie down on the ground with your feet on the floor and your legs at a 90 degree bend at the knee. Instead of placing your arms behind your head, put your arms on the ground above your head in an elbow-bent, arm-relaxed pose. To get into the starting position for reverse crunches, start to curl your knees in toward your body until your hips just start to roll off the ground. Your lower back should be flat against the ground – hold it that way using abdominal tension. This is the start point of the reverse crunch.

To perform the exercise, curl your hips off the ground using only your abdominal tension. If you feel your ribcage pulling and/or your arms trying to rise off the ground, focus on relaxing your upper body. Try to make just your lower body move during the exercise. Crunch your knees into your chest and curl your hips off the ground, squeezing briefly at the top of the motion and then smoothly lowering your hips down toward the ground. When you reach the starting position, repeat the motion.

For most people, this can feel rather difficult in the beginning. Just stay focused on using your abdominals and keeping good form. Don't be surprised if you feel it below your navel and find your upper body tensing when you perform the motion.

Rotational and Organ Support

Side Torso Raises over Swiss Ball – Prop your hip into a Swiss Ball far enough away from a wall to brace your feet against. If you find yourself losing your balance, adjust the ball with your hip lower down and be sure that your feet are spread out to form a triangle against the wall for foundational support. Place your hands behind your neck and be sure not to pull on your head or neck. "Relax"

your upper body down around the curve of the ball so your hip is on one side of the ball and your shoulders on the other. At this point, you should be stretched over the ball. From here, curl your torso up sideways, being sure to keep your movement side-to-side without flexing or extending your spine. Stay smooth in your motion and be sure to curl up as much as possible (as if you are trying to touch your hip with your elbow).

Swiss Ball Lateral Rolls – Lie down face-up on the ball, shoulder blades at the top of the ball. Keeping your hips up and your knees bent, put your body into a ‘table’ position. Stretch your arms directly out to your sides, parallel to the ground. At this point, you should be in a ‘T’ or ‘cross’ shape with your body – maintain this shape as best you can during the entire exercise. Starting with small movements, roll your upper body along the ball, keeping your body in the cross shape with your arms and hips parallel to the floor. Roll laterally in one direction and then reverse to roll the other way. This is one repetition. You’ll most likely feel this in your sides as your oblique muscles fight to stabilize your body. It’s a good idea to keep your tongue on the roof of your mouth, as this helps to stabilize the neck during the exercise (be sure not to flex your neck). If you find yourself deviating from the ‘cross’ shape, try holding a broomstick or long rod in your arms across your body.

Russian Twists – Russian twists on a Swiss Ball come in two forms – upper- and lower-body. Both of these exercises can be done with weight (like a medicine ball) for added difficulty.

The upper body Russian twists are performed with your head and shoulders on the ball. Keeping your arms out in front of you and the rest of your body in the ‘table’ position, rotate your head, shoulders and arms as one triangle against the ball. Your opposite shoulder will roll right off of the ball as your other shoulder ‘digs into’ the Swiss ball. Turn as far as you can while holding good form with your lower body (hips parallel to the ground and knees at 90 degrees) and then rotate the other directions.

The lower body Russian twists are performed lying on the ground in a ‘chair’ position (as if you were sitting in a chair and it fell backwards onto the ground) with the ball between your calves and thighs and your knees at a 90 degree angle. Your calves should be on top of the ball – your arms should be out to your sides with your palms down. Slowly rotate your legs toward one side of your body, keeping your legs in contact with the Swiss Ball the entire time and both of your shoulders on the ground. You may feel a stretch through either your oblique muscles and/or your lower back/sacroiliac region. Try rotating a small amount to start and increase the rotation with each repetition. The normal range of motion puts the thighs and opposite shoulder flat on the ground.