

ABS-OLUTELY THE BEST ABS EVER!

Raphael Calzadilla

"I'm losing my abs!" The first utterance of disgust by a cheesecake-filled physique competitor a week after a contest. Even though his entire body is starting to go the way of the Pillsbury doughboy, the abs taking leave is just too much to handle.

My last show was in November of 2012, and I vowed that instead of my usual off-season 15- to 17-pound gain, I would create a strategy that would keep me within 5 to 6 pounds of stage weight, allow for more food while maintaining ripped abs, and make it easier to have a life. Yes, sports fans, I love living on the edge of delusional.

But I did it.

One of the exciting things about maintaining your abs is that when you work them with the proper intensity and with effective exercises, the next day they look hard as a rock and tight. If they could speak, they'd scream, "To the beach!"

I don't believe that working your abs has to involve complex routines. However, I do think one has to respect the structure of the abs, which consists of the rectus abdominis (the six-pack), internal obliques, external obliques, and the transverse abdominis (deepest of the abdominal muscles), and engage in movement patterns that initiate from three directions:

Lower body movement (e.g., leg raise)

Upper body movement (e.g., crunch)

Rotational movement (e.g., twisting motion)

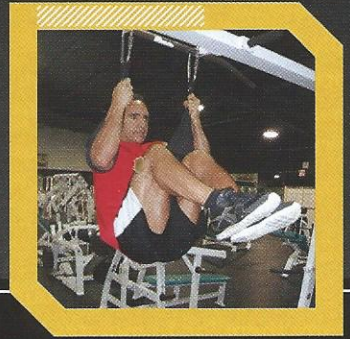
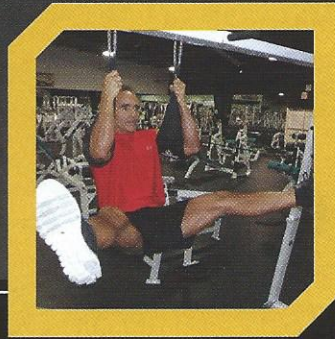
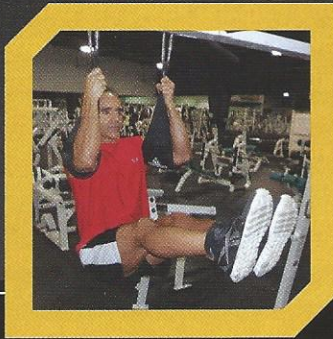
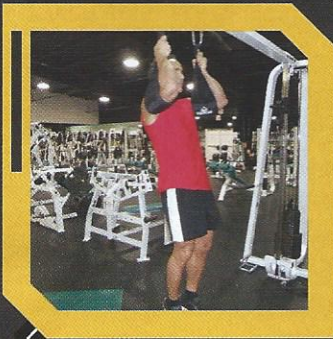
Although every ab exercise will engage all of the abdominal muscles, this approach will place more emphasis on target areas. Just as you would work any body part with variety and from various angles, it's best to use a similar approach for the abdominals.

Much like any other muscle group, the abs must be worked with intensity, resistance (for some exercises), and with the proper frequency. What works for one person, though, may not be the ideal solution for another. Some people never work their abs and claim that heavy deadlifts and squats will take care of the area based on how much core work is involved. Some work them once a week like any other body part, and some work them more often. Find what is most effective for you and what routines are most enjoyable.

I've experimented with working my abs 4 or 5 days a week and ultimately discovered that working them twice a week is where the magic is. I always include exercises that focus on the different movement patterns, but not necessarily all of them in the same workout.

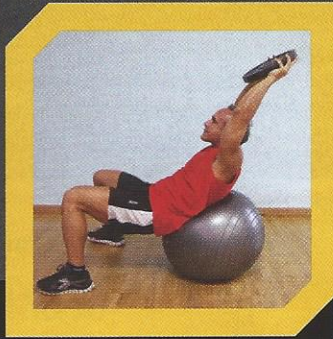
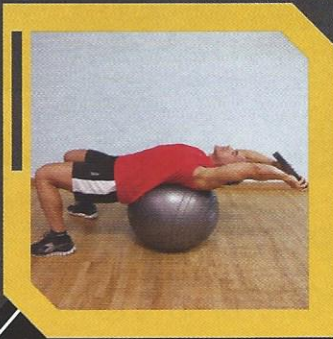
I've compiled some of my favorite ab exercises with suggested routines. The way you structure the routine ultimately will provide the best results based on your enthusiasm for performing it.

Hanging Straight-Leg Raise to Bent-Knee Raise (target: lower ab region, rectus abdominis) 3x15



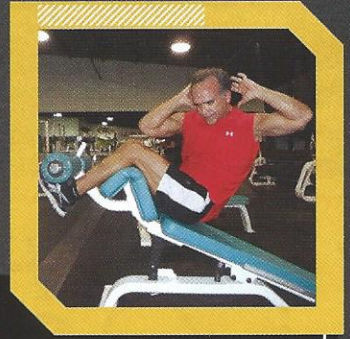
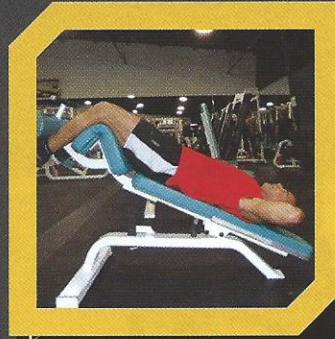
I perform two variations of hanging leg raises within the same set. While keeping my body as stable as possible to avoid swinging, I begin with a straight-leg raise to upper ab level, spread my legs outward and then back to center, lower, and repeat. These are not easy and they keep your abs contracted for a good amount of time. I generally perform 8 to 10 reps and then immediately continue with bent knee raises until I reach 15 total reps for the set, making sure I get to upper chest level. The rectus abdominis and external obliques will act only to stabilize your pelvis and waist during hip flexion so you'll have to flex your hips to chest level before waist flexion is possible.

Stability Ball Crunch with Resistance (target: rectus abdominis) 3x10-12



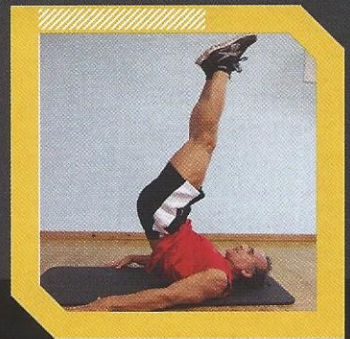
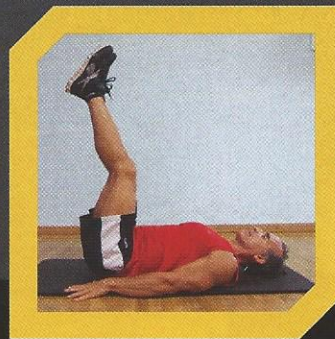
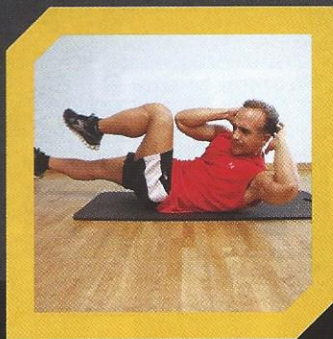
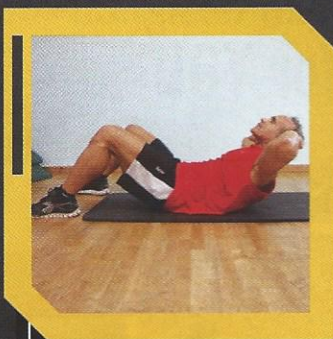
Grasp a weight plate or a dumbbell with both hands and position yourself on a stability ball with your shoulders and head suspended. Hold the weight behind your head with a slight bend in your elbows. Keep your body as stable as possible and focus on an intense contraction of the abs. Don't allow the weight to drift in front of your head as you perform the crunch. To make this more intense, bring your feet very close together. That will take away some stability and force you to work your abs even harder. Form must be precise.

Incline Twisting Crunch (target: obliques) 3x12/side



Place finger tips on the sides of your head. Flex and twist your waist to raise your upper torso from the bench to one side. Return to the original position and repeat on the opposite side.

Crunch—Bicycle—Hip Thrust (all 3 movement types) 3x10/10/10



The crunch is admittedly easy and acts almost as a warm-up for the remainder of the exercise. Perform 10 repetitions. Then immediately perform a bicycle-pedaling motion, alternating your left elbow to your right knee, then your right elbow to your left knee. Perform 10 repetitions on each side. Next, place the palms of your hands on the floor by your sides, lift your legs up until your lower body is perpendicular to the floor, then lift your hips off the floor until you feel a full contraction of the lower ab area. Perform 10 reps.

These are not the only exercises I perform; they're simply my favorites. Others that I like include the cable rope crunch, incline leg raises, and medicine ball rotational pass with a partner (because it's fun!).

The key is to work in various movement patterns; work the abs hard and then let them recover.

Suggested Routines:

Supersets – Choose two of your favorite exercises and perform them for 15 minutes. Count the total number of reps in that time and try to beat that number the next time you train.

Super Sets with Weaker Areas – If you're working abs with fairly challenging resistance, you also can superset abs with a body part that needs more attention, such as calves.

Giant Sets – Choose 4 to 5 exercises and perform them consecutively for 10 to 15 reps each. Rest for 30 to 45 seconds and repeat a second time.

We all know (I hope) that body fat has to be low enough for the abs to be visible. And if you're a physique competitor like me, you can relate to my desire to remain close to stage

condition and always to have eye-popping abs. But if you're a powerlifter, participate in sports, or just want to be in better shape, you might not be overly-concerned about how your abs look. But, powerful abs are essential for functional purposes based on your sport and even just life activity. That may sound like a contradiction coming from the guy who wants beach-ready abs 365 days a year, but I believe that it's important to focus on your goal, not the forced goal of a programmed, media-driven society. Always have fun with your routine and don't be afraid to experiment. Find what works for you, embrace your goals, and don't forget that this is about having fun and enjoying the experience.

Raphael is a certified personal trainer with 23 years of experience. He has worked with hundreds of people from all walks of life—new moms, busy professionals, athletes, and people who've never set foot in a gym. Raphael has been quoted in numerous health and fitness publications, including *Women's Health & Fitness*, *OK!*, and *Essence Magazine* and has been a guest on many radio and television programs. Raphael's distinct message is that fitness and health is a truly holistic solution that impacts the physical, mental, and emotional states of a person. His mission is to empower people to reclaim their health and become the hero of their own lives.