

Q. What exercises or food choices will help me achieve a flatter stomach? I already do 45 minutes of aerobic exercise daily.

A. You probably are carrying too much fat around the middle (abdominal fat). It is common in middle age and older. Pinch the fat on your abdomen. If you can pinch an inch or more, there is too much abdominal fat. It would be nice if there were a magical exercise to flatten stomachs. The reality is that it takes a combination of weight loss, aerobic exercise, and muscle strengthening exercises.

Let's start with weight loss. You need to cut your calorie intake. A good goal is about 500 calories less than your daily calorie needs. This will result in about a pound of fat loss weekly. Go to www.mypyramid.gov and click on "Get a personalized plan" to find out how many calories you currently need at your present weight and activity level.

Next, return to the MyPyramid website home page and click on "Get weight loss information." Here you will learn more about what kinds of food to eat (primarily low-calorie density foods such as soups, salads, fresh fruit and vegetables, etc.). The site also provides a tracking system to log how many calories you are eating daily and how much you are exercising. By following this plan you should lose about 1 pound of fat every week. This will slowly remove excess fat from your abdomen as well as the rest of your body.

Keep up your 45 minutes of aerobic exercise daily. If you want to burn more calories, increase your exercise time to 60-90 minutes daily. This will burn more calories and help decrease your overall body fat.

Lastly, you can tone your abdomen and improve your figure by increasing the muscle strength and tone of your abdominal muscles. Try these exercises:

- **Bent knee curl-ups.** Lie on your back on a mat in a "sitting" position (knees bent 90 degrees with your feet off the floor). Fold your arms across the front of you, fingers touching your shoulders. Alternately, you can position your arms at a right angle to your body with your



fingers touching your ears. Slowly curl up and touch your elbows to your knees, and then slowly lower your back to the mat. Perform rhythmically, without jerking.

- **Abdominal crunches.** Lie on your back on a mat with your knees bent 90 degrees and your feet on the floor about shoulder width apart. With your arms folded in front of you, fingers touching your shoulders, tighten your abdominal muscles. Raise your head and shoulders of the ground a few inches. Hold for a couple seconds and then relax. Keep your movement smooth and under control.
- **Twisting crunch.** Lie on your back in a sitting position (knees bent 90 degrees with your feet off the floor). As a modification, you can rest your feet on the floor about shoulder width apart. With your hands touching your ears, slowly curl up, touching your right elbow to your left knee. Slowly lower your torso until your shoulder blades touch the mat. Slowly curl up again, this time touching your left elbow to your right knee, and then gently lower your shoulders to the mat. Keep your neck relaxed.
- **Bent knee sideward hip roll.** Lay on your back on a mat in a "sitting" position (knees bent 90 degrees with your feet in the air). Slowly roll your knees to the left until your legs are nearly touching the floor. Hold for at least 5 seconds. Then roll to the right, repeating the exercise.
- **Vertical leg lift.** Lie on your back with your hands to your side. Raise your feet high in the air, with your legs straight and crossed at the ankles. Raise your legs and hips upward, lifting your hips off the floor 1-2 inches. Hold for 2 seconds and then slowly lower your hips to the mat.

Repeat these exercises as many times as you can without undue strain. As you get stronger, you will be able to do more repetitions – and you will soon start slimming down and getting a flatter abdomen.