

A B- solutely impressive!

Home exercise equipment for the abdominals

By Gerald Greenspan

They're the current rage. You can't go a single day without seeing at least a couple of advertisements, whether in print or on TV for some type of abdominal exerciser. Numerous different manufacturers market these devices and even Healthrider® and Nordictack® have jumped on the bandwagon.

So do these devices really deliver what they claim -- a 'six-pack!' or "washboard" abs? And should you be spending hard-earned money on one of the 'variety of "ab" exercisers? Lastly, what, if any, advantages does one *gain* from, using these devices versus performing the same exercises without any special device? This article addresses these issues.

First of all, what's all the fuss about abdominal muscles anyway? The mid section muscles, of which the abdominals are a component, constitute the body's foundation. Stability of the midsection is necessary for appropriate movement of the arms and legs.

From an aesthetic perspective, well-defined abdominals epitomize fitness. How many times have you seen someone with a muscular chest, arms or legs but who also sports a beer belly? Would you consider this person in shape? Probably not. However, if you see a less muscular individual with firm, chiseled abdominals, you know this person is in good shape. The rectus abdominus, the central abdominal muscle, is without a doubt, one of the most impressive looking muscles of the body.

So now that you're convinced you want to work on your abs. Do the abdominal exercisers pack some "magical" motion that can quickly, develop washboard "abs" for your body? Sorry, but the answer is no. Does that mean these devices are worthless? Again, the answer is no.

All the exercises that are performed with the abdominal devices can be performed without any special device, Most of the abdominal devices do two things: 1) guide your torso through the correct motion path, i.e. a curling motion and; 2) support your head.

Are these devices worth your hard earned money? It depends. From my experience as a personal trainer, I find most people abhor doing abdominal exercises. If you fall into that group, you may find using an Kb- Roller or some other abdominal device makes training your midsection more enjoyable. If that's the case, then the device is worth the price.

There are three caveats I have for people using these devices. First, by performing abdominal crunches correctly without the device, you can strengthen muscles called cervical flexors as well as the abdominals. Many people lack adequate strength in these muscles which can contribute to neck problems.

Second, many people use their arms to assist with the crunch motion when using the abdominal device. Some devices are even equipped with large pads on which the upper arms can rest. A

large back muscle, the latissimus dorsi or “lat” for short, spans from lower spine and pelvis to the upper arm. Since the lower spine and pelvis remain on the floor during ‘the abdominal crunch exercise, it is quite possible you may inadvertently be contracting your “lat’ to do some of the work.

Lastly, since a device guides your torso through the correct path, muscles that would do this job probably are working to a lesser degree. Situated on the left and right sides of the body's midsection are, two other abdominal muscles. The internal and external obliques. During several abdominal exercises (e.g. the abdominal crunch and reverse abdominal crunch), these muscles contract to function as guidewires, keeping the torso or lower body moving in a smooth, curling path. To perform normal physical activities safely and efficiently, you need similar coordination between these abdominal muscles.

By now you probably realize the “ab” devices offer no magic for your midsection. Whether or not purchasing one of these devices is prudent depend on the individual. If you do decide to purchase one, choose a sturdy device that supports the head and which you feel comfortable in when performing the exercise.

Unfortunately, the only true way to get great looking “abs’ is through a combination of correct exercise and proper nutrition. I know, that’s what you were afraid of.

Gerald Greenspan is the founder of Columbus Fitness Consultants and a national presenter on exercise and nutrition. Greenspan holds a Master of Science degree’ in Exercise Biomechanics from The Ohio State University as ‘well as is scheduled to graduate from OSU’s Physical Therapy Program in June 1997.