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Awesome Abs — Stage 1
12 Weeks to Astounding Abdominals
by Ian King

In the last few years, Ian King has given us several 12 week specialization programs for almost every major muscle group. Now, for the first time, Ian has provided *Testosterone* with a four stage ab training program designed to prevent injuries, improve athletic performance and, last but not least, make you look great with your shirt off. This is the first stage of that 12 week program.

What follows is an example of a four stage abdominal program. As with all my prior programs published on *T-mag*, this is a generalized program. I didn't used to provide generalized programs because my focus was on customizing training based on individual needs. I still believe in the power of individualization, but I also realize that for many, a generalized program is far better than what they're already doing in the gym. Plus, there's much to be learned by following a pre-made program and a person can later modify it to meet his personal needs.

In my [overview](#) of abdominal training published previously in *T-mag*, I covered a lot of ground. I strongly recommend you read this article if you haven't done so, or read it again to refresh your memory. That way I won't have to repeat myself too much here and you'll have a good idea of where I'm coming from.

Generally speaking, this program prioritizes the potential benefits of abdominal training in the following order:

- 1) Injury prevention
- 2) Transference to sport
- 3) Visual impact

I feel the primary purpose of ab training is to contribute to the health of the lower back, hips, and lower extremities. I placed sport transference second because of the general transference this program may have. There's no attempt to be sport specific or hyper-specific in the program. The reason I placed visual impact last is because of the role played by body fat. Obviously, visual impact will be lessened if you're overly fat because of poor dietary choices or other factors. (And by the way, I know of at least one highly promoted abdominal "washboard" where the owner of said washboard omits to share with his audience the role of liposuction in his development!)

Anticipated Questions

Before we get into the details, I'll expand on the following anticipated questions:

How many weeks should I stay on this program?

As with all the programs I write, you need to be the judge on this, but probably somewhere between two and four weeks per stage. The average person would probably benefit from doing each stage for three weeks, thus the "12 Weeks to Astounding Abdominals" subtitle (four stages of three weeks), but you decide.

How do you decide? If you cease to improve week to week, you're either going too hard or have been on the program too long. Solution? Either switch to the next stage or review your training load (volume and intensity). Ideally, you make the switch before you see much, if any, residual fatigue which could damage your work capacity or performance.

When should I do these ab exercises?

You can do them as either part of the regular training session or separate from it at another time in the day. It's your call. In this first stage, if you're going to do them with the regular training session, I'm going to recommend you do them *before* the weight workout.

Now, as I like educated trainees and I like them to have an input in this decision, you can override the above if you wish. But if you've done less than 50% of your training history with abs first in the workout, then I'd recommend doing as I suggest. I suspect the majority of the world's strength-training population would be doing them first in this case.

The only other reason for not doing them first would be if your abdominal strength was in excess of the strength of the rest of your body; not in absolute terms, of course, but relatively speaking. Here's a quick test: Lie on your back on the ground. Bend your knees until your feet are flat on the ground. Don't hook or anchor your feet under anything. Touch your hands on opposite shoulders. Slowly, taking five seconds at a constant pace, sit up until your elbows touch your knees. No jerking movements or arm or head throwing allowed, and your feet aren't to come off the ground. If you can't do this — and I don't expect many will initially be able to do so — you need to hit the abs first!



Can I change the order of the exercises?

Sure, provided you have an objective rationale for doing so. I've based the program on loose assumptions about the trainee, including that most peoples' "lower" abs will be less advanced than their upper abs. This isn't always the case. If you understand which abdominal sub-groups the exercises are intended to target and have a rational belief that your needs differ from the suggested sequence, you may change the order. Generally speaking, work from weakest to strongest in this phase.

Can I change the volume?

Yes, but do you need to? I don't hesitate to say that this program is a generalization and therefore it's impossible for it to suit all. However, before you go and play with the variables, have a good hard think about the reasons driving you. Depending on what you're using abdominal training to achieve, I feel that volume higher than that provided isn't needed.

For most of you, just do one set per exercise in stage one. For those who feel for whatever reason they want to do more volume, consider a second set on all or some of the exercises.

Can I change the reps?

Again, sure. But again, do you need to? Review your driving force. Is it rational and objective? Have you given the parameters provided in this program an adequate and objective trial?

Can I change the training method?

The method recommended is basically a standard-set approach — work set, rest, work set, rest, etc. If you wanted to (and this is more applicable to those doing two sets on some or all of the exercises) you could use a circuit approach where you do one set of all exercises without resting between exercises, then rest one to two minutes and repeat the circuit. For whatever purpose getting a muscle "burn" will do for your body, you'll get it using this method!

Can I use something besides a four-day split?

Sure! You'll just need to modify it to suit. In this model program, I've used an A/B rotating program. That is, I have you doing A and B twice in the training week on an alternating approach. If you're training only three days a week, you could go A-B-A one week, B-A-B the next etc. If you were only training two days, just use the A and B program in the week.

Enough talk. Let's do it!

STAGE 1
Weeks 1-3

A — Days 1 and 3 (Mon/Thurs)

After a general warm-up and stretching, perform the following:

Thin tummy variations

Sets: 1-2 x 10

Speed: 5 second holds

Rest: 0-30 seconds

Toes to sky

Sets: 1-2 x 10

Speed: 5 second holds

Rest: 0-30 seconds

Side raises on ground

Sets: 1-2 x 10-20

Speed: 313

Rest: 0-30 seconds

Side lying trunk and leg raises

Sets: 1-2 x 5-10

Speed: 313 or 3-5 second holds

Rest: 0-30 seconds

Seated thin tummy/squeeze cheeks

Sets: 1 x 5-10

Speed: 5 second holds

Rest: 0-30 seconds

*See our [FAQ](#) section if you aren't familiar with tempo prescriptions like "313".

Here's a description of the exercises involved in A day, stage one:

Thin Tummy Variations

The thin tummy drill is the cornerstone upon which I build my abdominal programs, yet it's one of the hardest to teach. I've seen this drill done in the kneeling position, but I have a preference for doing it on your back. Furthermore, use a few original and unique teaching points.

Lie on your back, knees bent to 90-degrees, feet flat. Place both hands under your belt line with your fingers heading down into the pubic area and the thumbs placed higher up on the rectus abdominus (upper abdominal region). Throughout all the following levels of difficulty, use the fingers to provide feedback that the "lower" abs (obliques and transverse abdominus) are contracted — pulling the lower tummy thinner and creating a high level of tension under the skin — and that the upper ab region is hollowed and non-contracted.



Should this position at any time change or you feel that it's going to change (e.g. upper tummy bulges, pelvis anteriorly rotates), terminate the range or the set. I focus more on how the muscles are "set" than on the pressure of the lumbar to the ground or position of the pelvis, although both are symptomatic of a good set position.

Initially, you may struggle to even find the muscles I want you to contract! Work with five second holds, ten reps a set. The next step is to be able to breath normally during the isometric contractions!

I have at least five levels of difficulty that I teach and this simple isometric contraction is level one. In stage one of this program you should be happy to master the first level and maybe progress to level two.

Level 1: Isometric holds (looking for above "set" position) in the lying, knee bent positions.

Level 2: As above, but lift one leg up, lower it, reset, repeat with other leg, etc.

Level 3: As above, but when you lift one leg up, extend it out as far as set position allows.

Level 4: As above, but start with both knees up, bent to 90 degrees knees and hips, cycling one leg at a time out towards a parallel to ground position as far as set position allows.

Level 5: As above, but extending both legs out together.

Notes:

Speed of movement — Isometric holds for 5.

Selecting appropriate level — The only way to really know what level of difficulty is appropriate is to perform a rep or two at each level, starting from the least difficult, until you're being challenged. Don't continue on looking for failure; work with a level that's manageable. In this exercise you really need to learn to feel when you lose the set position. This goes for most exercises in this program.

Toes to Sky

This exercise is a bit easier to teach. Lie on your back, arms out on the ground at 90 degrees to the trunk, have your legs together, 90 degrees hip flexion, so that legs are vertical.



I identify at least three levels of difficulty in this drill, but I don't expect you to go beyond level 1 in stage one.

Level 1: Lift the pelvis as far off the ground as possible whilst maintaining a totally vertical leg position (initially this may not be very far at all) and hold for 5-10 seconds.

Level 2: As above, but bend one knee to 90 degrees; alternating on each rep which leg is bent and which is straight.

Level 3: As above, but bend both legs so that the knees are at 90 degrees.

Notes

Speed of movement — A controlled lift, a steady hold for 5-10 seconds, no use of momentum, keeping legs (or upper leg at least) always totally vertical.

Side Raises on Ground

This is my basic exercise for developing lateral trunk flexion. Whilst it can be argued that the position and action isn't totally isolated to flexion in the horizontal plane, it's a low level exercise appropriate for the first quality of strength — control and stability.

Lie on your back, knees together and bent to about 90 degrees. Roll the knees over together so that they're on the ground, with the shoulders and upper back still parallel to the ground. Now flex the trunk, basically up towards the roof or sky. I like to have the fingers lightly touching the front of the head, elbows out at 45 degrees from the body and arm/elbow angle not changing during the lift. The placement of the hands will alter the level of difficulty. The further the hands are above the head, the harder the movement.



Side lying trunk and leg raises: This is an additional lateral flexion exercise, one that includes both trunk and hip/thigh lateral flexion. Lie on your side with your hands straight out behind your head in line with your body and legs straight. You must start on your side and stay on our side. You can lock your hands together if you want. Now simultaneously raise your arms and your legs so that neither are in contact with the ground.



Notes

Speed of movement — You have a choice of a 3-5 second hold in the top position or a controlled movement of 313.

Selecting appropriate level — If you're struggling with balance you may find one or the other speed option easier, but there isn't a lot of difference in which one you use.

Seated Thin Tummy/Squeeze Cheeks

This is an exercise from the category I describe as "co-contractions of the abs and glutes." Sit on the end of a prone bench with your knees and feet together, feet on the ground, chest up and back straight. Now create that thin dish abdominal position I described in the thin tummy drill. Make the lower abdominals thin and contract them. You can use your hands down there in the same way for feedback on the quality of this contraction. Now squeeze your cheeks in a manner that results in you "levitating" an inch or so off the bench! You may find that sucking up the pelvic floor (a nice way of saying the sphincter) contributes to the quality of the contraction.



Notes

Speed of movement — Use a 5 second hold at the top.

Selecting appropriate level — If you found this too easy, you could do the same thing standing.

B — Days 2 and 4 (Tue/Friday)

After a general warm-up and stretching, perform the following:

Slow up/Slow down (or cheat up/slow down)

Sets: 1-2 x 10

Speed: 515 or 5-15 second negatives if using alternative

Rest: 0-30 seconds

Reverse curl downs

Sets: 1-2 x 10

Speed: 101, 202, 303 etc.

Rest: 0-30 seconds

Russian twist with leg cycle in V-sit

Sets: 1-2 x 15-30

Speed: 202 (full rotations — 303)

Rest: 0-30 seconds

Lateral leg lowers

Sets: 1-2 x 10-20

Speed: 303

Rest: 0-30 seconds

Push-up position on knees

Sets: 1 x 5-15

Speed: 5 second holds

Rest: 0-30 seconds

Exercise Descriptions

Slow Up/Slow Down

This is my core exercise for developing trunk flexion. It allows excellent progression for all levels of competence, from those who can't sit up at all to those who can sit up using the most difficult variations. The basic position for this exercise is lying on the back, knees bent to about 90 degrees, and feet flat on the floor. Then you sit up or curl up the trunk, in most part to a full sitting position.



Control progressions

Level 1: Cheat up/slow down

Level 2: Cheat up/slow down + isometric stops during lower (pause on the way down)

Level 3: Reverse curl downs (See below)

Level 4: Slow up/slow down

Level 5: Slow up/slow downs with isometric pauses during the up phase

Notes

Speed of movement — It's critical in these control exercises that the time indicated for each contraction phase is evenly distributed throughout the movement, i.e. no momentum or acceleration during the concentric (positive) phase and no collapsing during lower phase. If momentum or acceleration is used during the concentric phase, a lower level of difficulty is recommended. If collapsing occurs during lowering phase, use a shorter total time for the lowering with the aim to allow a uniform quicker movement throughout the eccentric (negative).

Arm positions — Each of these levels of difficulty have at least five different arm positions that provide further variety/levels of difficulty:

Level 1: Arms remain parallel to ground, pointed towards feet

Level 2: Upper arms remain parallel to ground, hands on opposite elbow

Level 3: Upper arms remain parallel to ground, hands on opposite shoulder

Level 4: Hands touching forehead, elbows out at 45 degrees to front of head

Level 5: Hands touching side of head, elbows forming a straight line either side

Reverse Curl-Downs

These are actually a progression in the above exercise, but I'm going to get you to do this as an additional exercise in this program. Lie on the ground on your back and bend your knees to about 90-degrees with your feet flat on the floor. Your feet are not to be anchored under anything.

Start in the full sit-up position with arms parallel to ground. The arm position can be varied to alter load (make it harder) if needed. Lower your trunk back to the ground an inch or two, counting "one thousand and one" as you do, then take that same time to return back to the top starting position. Do both in a controlled, non-accelerated manner.

Then lower your trunk back towards the ground again, this time going a few more inches, basically the range involved as you count to "one thousand and one, one-thousand and two." Return back to the top starting position in this same time frame. Repeat this method adding a second each rep and going a bit further down each time.

Basically, if you're able to do your final and tenth rep all the way down to the ground and control back to the top position in the same non-accelerated manner, you'd divided the range into ten equal points, each point being the point to which you lower each subsequent rep. However, if you aren't able to either lower under control in ten seconds all the way down or return back up in this controlled manner in ten seconds and without your feet moving, then you need to identify a higher point which will be your range for the tenth rep. Then create ten equal points from the top to this trunk angle, and these will be your points of range for each rep.



Notes

Speed of movement — It's critical in these control exercises that the time indicated for each contraction phase is evenly distributed throughout the movement — no momentum or acceleration is to be used during the concentric phase and no collapsing during lower phase. So only use a range that allows this and divide it into ten levels, one for each rep.

Arm positions — Each of these levels of difficulty have at least five different arm positions that provide further variety/levels of difficulty:

Level 1: Arms remain parallel to ground, pointed towards feet

Level 2: Upper arms remain parallel to ground, hands on opposite elbow

Level 3: Upper arms remain parallel to ground, hands on opposite shoulder

Level 4: Hands touching forehead, elbows out at 45 degrees to front of head

Level 5: Hands touching side of head, elbows forming a straight line either side

Selecting appropriate level — The only way to really know what level of difficulty is appropriate is to perform the movement. If you find you're not able to perform a certain range at a rep prior to the tenth rep, this rep becomes the tenth rep in the future.

Russian Twist with Leg Cycle in V-Sit

This is a core option in the trunk rotation category. Sit on the ground and lean the trunk back to about 45 degrees. Take your feet off the ground and have one knee brought up to your chest and the other leg out in front, parallel but not resting on the ground.

Now rotate your body to one side, rotating from the waist. If the base of the waist stops rotating, don't look to rotate the upper trunk further. At the same time, lower the bent leg down to nearly straight and parallel but not touching the ground as you bring the other knee up. For coordination, try bringing the knee up on the side to which you're rotating the trunk.



Notes

Speed of movement — Use a controlled two to three seconds to one side and two to three seconds back to the other side. The legs swap and cycle in this same controlled manner.

Arm positions — Place your hands out in front at 90 degrees to the body, interlocking thumbs gently.

Lateral Leg Lowers

This is a rotation drill for the hips and legs. Lie on your back, legs in the air together and arms out at 90 degrees to the body. Keep the head down on the ground. Now lower the legs to one side, going all the way down to the ground (but not resting there) maintaining that 90-degree angle between legs and upper body. Keep the upper body still, head included, at all times. Now return the legs back up to the vertical and over to the other side in the same way.



Notes

Speed of movement — Use a controlled three seconds to one side and three seconds back to the other side.

Arm positions — Place your arms out at 90 degrees to the body, resting on the ground.

Push Up Position on Knees

This is a core drill in the "integration" category. I don't get carried away with advanced options in this category until I've raised the abilities in the above categories.

Lie on the ground on your stomach, legs out straight and together and arms under the chest. Have the lower arms parallel to each other and a few inches apart under the chest. Now raise the body onto the knees and elbows, or the feet and elbows, depending upon the level of difficulty you want. Raise to and hold in a position where the knees or ankles (depending upon which option you chose) are in a straight line to the shoulders, but not necessarily parallel to the ground. After the hold duration, lower back down to the start position (between each rep).



Notes

Speed of movement — Hold the top position for five seconds. Recover for 1-2 seconds at the bottom position (resting on ground).

Arm positions — Have the lower arms parallel to each other and a few inches apart under the chest (knee or toe option). If you're using the full push-up option, go with the arms in a typical push-up position. Levels of difficulty include:

Level 1: Raise to elbows and knees

Level 2: Raise to elbows and toes

Level 3: Raise to hands and toes

Conclusion

Two quick points: One, I haven't addressed the posterior trunk muscles, as they're usually taken care of in your regular training program. This is especially true if you're following one of my *Get Buffed* programs. Two, if the text and photos in this article aren't enough to help you understand the exercises, then my video, *Ian King's Guide to Abdominal Training*, may be of value to those who wish to exploit fully the potential of these programs. This video can be ordered at GetBuffed.net.

That's it! Remember, I place priority on the quality of your technique over the quantity or load, especially in stage one of the program. Stage two will be posted at *T-mag* by the time you need it, so get started today!