

Crunches Give You Six-Pack Abs— And Other Exercise Myths

By Jennifer L. W. Fink

Let science tweak your workout.

Want to get in shape? Don't let out-dated advice hold you back. Too many teens (and adults) still believe hand-me-down advice that's been repeated over and over but never proved by science. Here, two fitness pros help you separate exercise fact from fiction.

Myth #1: Crunches give you six-pack abs.

Fact: Everyone has six-pack abs—sort of. Your abdominal muscles are laid out just like a bodybuilder's, in nice symmetrical rows up and down your belly. Most people, though, have a layer of fat over the abdominal muscles that make the six-pack difficult to see, and crunches won't remove that fat.

"Spot reduction doesn't work," says Fabio Comana, a California-based exercise physiologist and personal trainer. "If you need to lose belly weight, you have to involve the whole body."

You also have to exercise against resistance to get definition. "You've got to get the muscle to grow a bit to create separation between the muscle and the tendons around it," Comana says. So if you really want a six-pack, consider holding a medicine ball to your chest during your crunches. Increase the weight over a period of weeks to sculpt your abs.

Myth #2: No pain, no gain.

Fact: There's a bit of truth to this one. To improve, athletes have to push themselves slightly beyond what's comfortable, says Brooke White, a physical education teacher and cross-country, track, and swimming coach in Milwaukee.

"Once you feel comfortable running one mile, try running a mile and a half," White says. "Or if you can run for five minutes, try six minutes." Your muscles will feel sore, and you'll probably breathe harder than normal, but that's because your heart, lungs, and muscles are adapting to the increased activity.

Exercise should never be painful, though. If you feel sharp pain during a workout, stop. You could be injured. Chronic pain—or any kind of soreness that doesn't go away after a few days—should be checked out by a doctor.

Myth #3: Lifting weights is only for weight lifters and bodybuilders.

Fact: Strength training is for everyone! The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that teens get at least 60 minutes of physical activity every day and that at least three of those days include activities that strengthen muscles and bones.

Why? Properly exercising your muscles and bones can decrease your risk of injury during sports. Girls, especially, are vulnerable to knee injuries such as anterior cruciate ligament tears (experts aren't completely sure yet why girls are more susceptible), but strengthening the muscles around the knees and ankles increases your chances of staying in the game, Comana says. Strength training now can also prevent the loss of bone and muscle tissue when you get older.

You don't need weights or even weight machines to get the benefits of strength training. You can use exercise bands, kettlebells, or even your own body for resistance. Just check with your doctor before beginning any strength-training program.

Myth #4: You should stretch before you exercise.

Fact: Stretching before exercise can decrease your strength and power output. "Stretching actually turns off your nervous system," Comana says. "If you think of your nervous system like a computer, your nervous system is the software; your muscles are the hardware. During exercise, I want both the software and the hardware turned on."

Pre-exercise stretching doesn't decrease the risk of injury either. You're better off slowly getting active, gradually warming up the muscles you're about to use. Save the stretching for after your workout; it will help reduce muscle soreness.

Myth #5: Exercise can make you feel good.

Fact: The good feeling that you sometimes get after a run (or another hard workout) is probably a combination of feel-good brain chemicals and pride. Exercise releases endorphins and endocannabinoids into the bloodstream. Those body chemicals can help to reduce pain and make you feel happier.

Another bonus of exercising and getting fit? You may get to experience the feeling of success after your team scores a big win or you finish a race in your best time!

A Get-Moving Glossary

Wondering what some of the exercise items mentioned in this article look like and how they work?



Exercise Band

This big elastic band provides resistance when pulled on. It's great for strength training.

Claudelle
Girard/Istock



Kettlebell

This weight with a handle is lifted or swung.

Claudelle
Girard/Istock



Medicine Ball

This weighted ball can be lifted, tossed, and caught.

Claudelle
Girard/Istock

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. According to the passage, which of the following statements is true about lifting weights?

- A It will make you more appealing to the opposite sex.
- B It is only for weight lifters and body builders.
- C It will strengthen your muscles and bones.
- D It must be done seven days a week to have any positive effect.

2. The author of this passage lists five myths and explains something about each one. What is similar about all of the author's explanations?

- A They explain why each myth is true and why it should be followed.
- B They examine how much, if any, truth is in each myth.
- C They discuss why no one should ever believe each saying.
- D They show how exercise can be bad for you.

3. What conclusion about exercise advice is supported by the passage?

- A Some advice may sound good but could be incorrect.
- B You should never follow advice that doesn't come from a doctor or scientist.
- C The best exercise will cause pain.
- D If you exercise properly, you will become a great athlete.

4. Read the following sentence from the passage:

"Girls, especially, are vulnerable to knee injuries such as anterior cruciate ligament tears (experts aren't completely sure yet why girls are more susceptible), but strengthening the muscles around the knees and ankles increases your chances of staying in the game."

As used in the passage, what does **susceptible** mean?

- A willing to work hard
- B intelligent
- C at risk
- D capable

5. Which statement best describes the author's purpose in writing this passage?

- A To tell readers how to exercise
- B To separate good advice from bad advice
- C To explain why weightlifting is the best exercise for everyone
- D To solve readers' weight lifting problems

6. According to the passage, how should people react if their exercise causes pain?

7. Why would people believe advice that isn't true?

8. The question below is an incomplete sentence. Choose the word that best completes the sentence.

Athletes who want to improve their skills will sometimes exercise harder _____ they have ever done before.

- A because
- B than
- C and
- D without

9. Answer the following questions based on the sentence below.

To build your strength, you should exercise against resistance a few times a week.

Who? you

(do) What? _____

Why? _____

When? _____

10. **Vocabulary Word:** adapt: to get used to.

Use the vocabulary word in a sentence: _____

Teacher Guide and Answers

Passage Reading Level: Lexile 980

Featured Text Structure: Enumerative – the writer includes a list, giving examples of something. This text structure is often combined with cause/effect or problem/solution.

Passage Summary: “Crunches Gives You Six-Pack Abs” lists five commonly believed myths about exercise and explains why they are not true – or at least not completely true. Topics include weightlifting, stretching, runner’s high, abdominal muscle strength, and ‘no pain, no gain.’ The passage also has a sidebar defining three common exercise items.

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6. According to the passage, how should people react if their exercise causes pain?

Suggested answer: If a person feels sharp pain while exercising, he or she should stop. If someone feels pain or soreness from exercise that doesn't go away after a few days, that person should see a doctor.

7. Why would people believe advice that isn't true?

Suggested answer: Some advice was once considered correct but is now out of date or has never been proven by science. Other advice may have some good information in it but also includes misinformation.

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(do) What? **should exercise against resistance**

Why? **to build your strength**

When? **a few times a week**

10. **Vocabulary Word:** adapt: to get used to.

Use the vocabulary word in a sentence: answers may vary.