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Crunch Time

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BODY CLINIC

CRUNCH TIME

Strong black woman in search of midsection to match? From love handles to lower-back pain, fitness instructor Violet Zaki, of Crunch's *CardioSculpt* workout video, answers our questions about working your abs. by *Lenya Floyd*

"What's the best way to do a basic crunch?"

A. Lie on a mat with your knees bent, your feet flat and your lower back pressed into the floor. Lightly touch the back of your ears, keeping your elbows pointed out to the side. Don't lock your fingers behind your head because you'll be more inclined to pull on your neck. **B.** Now use your abdominal muscles to slowly curl up until your shoulder blades are off the ground, then lower yourself back down to the floor. **You're doing it wrong if:** you start to feel pain in your back or your neck. **Quick tricks:** Try bringing your heels closer to your butt to make sure your lower back is pressed into the floor. You should put a towel under your back—even better, do this move on a fitness ball—if your lower back is bothering you.

"Do I have to do crunches lying on the ground?"

No—especially if you have a swayback. Instead, try using a sturdy chair. **A.** Position yourself on the edge of the chair, holding on to both sides of the seat for stability. Lean back at about a 30-degree angle, and bring your knees up toward your chest. **B.** Using your abdominals, extend your legs straight out but not exactly parallel to the floor.

"How do I lose my love handles?"

Work your oblique muscles: **A.** Stand with your feet shoulder-width apart. Bend your right knee and place your right hand on your hip for balance. Now extend your left leg to the side and slightly back. Reach your left arm over your head, keeping it in line with your left leg. **B.** In a smooth motion, use your obliques to simultaneously pull your left elbow down and bring your left knee up slightly higher than your hips. After one set, switch sides.

"How do I kick my sit-ups up a notch?" When the basic crunch gets too easy, increase the difficulty: Begin with your shoulders off the floor, so your abdominal muscles are already contracted. Keep crunching to get an inch or two higher, then return to starting position. Still not challenged? Start in the basic crunch position and extend your legs out straight, crossed at the ankles, slightly above the floor. Now do with a basic sit-up. Remember to exhale through your mouth when exerting yourself (during the crunch) and to inhale through your nose on the easy part (on the way down). Start with three sets of 15 to 20 reps. Pump up the number of reps as your muscles start to feel like crunch time is a cakewalk.

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