



By Mac Dodds, M.A. Certified Strength & Conditioning Specialist.

ABDOMINAL MACHINES: DO THEY WORK?

I often get questions about abdominal machines, like “do they work?” and “which ones are the best?” and “which ones will give me a six-pack the fastest?” This can be a tough question even for the most educated experienced fitness professional. Why? Like most fitness questions there are few answers that apply to everyone or every situation.

When I worked as a strength coach for the San Diego Padres I used to get the question, “what’s the best exercise for chest?” and I had to laugh because baseball players don’t benefit from having an exceptionally strong chest, and because there are lots of great exercises for the chest, but there isn’t a best one. There are exercises that are safer than others, some are more difficult, and some are more intense than others. The question does not give the coach or trainer enough information to tell the exerciser which exercise to choose, or what order to do it in, or how many reps, or how many sets or times per week. In fact, a professional wouldn’t even be able to determine a weight that you could safely use without learning more about you.

The best chest or abdominal ex-

ercise machine “depends” on your history, ability, and the outcome you are trying to achieve. Asking a fitness professional which abdominal exercise is the best is like asking a car salesman what the best car is.

Back to the question, “Do abdominal machines work?” Well, they do make the abdominal muscles contract, and which muscles are contracting depends on the machine and whether or not the exerciser is using the machine correctly. No, machines alone will not give you six pack abs. “Are they safe?” that depends on how the user uses them, but typically they are safe. “Are they effective?” There are other exercises that may be more effective. The advantage of machines is that they take most of the thinking out of the exercise, if you follow the guidelines for positioning yourself within the machine, you will most likely feel the targeted muscles. The disadvantage of using machines for abdominals is the same as the advantage; it isolates some of the abdominal muscles but neglects other abdominal muscles. So do they work? Yes, ab-machines can be one piece of the abdominal puzzle as long as the exer-

ciser doesn't only do machines. The bottom line, the user determines how much they put into the exercise, that is the key determinate. In other words, you get out what you put in.

As a fitness professional, my fear is that people who primarily use machines for abdominals, will neglect other parts of the torso that help with posture and a healthy spine, or that they will not challenge themselves enough to see results from the exercises they are doing. Additionally, if an exerciser only uses machines they are limited to the machines that are available in the club. For instance there may only be an abdominal machine that targets the rectus abdominis (the six-pack muscles), and none for the oblique’s. The person who relies on machines would also be deprived of a variety of fun abdominal exercises.

The key to having strong, well balanced abdominal and torso muscles is to consistently exercise all of the muscles in the torso by doing a variety of challenging exercises, or doing a variety of basic exercises and making them challenging by doing them correctly.

WORKING TO “BALANCE OUT” OVERUSE INJURIES

We have all at one time or another been limited in what we do at the gym as far as exercise. When we have an injury to a specific body part like an elbow joint, we oftentimes need to avoid doing exercises for the elbow, giving it a chance to heal. Other times the injury is to the soft tissue like a bruise, in which case the muscle can still be trained if the injury isn't too severe. The most frequent injuries that I see are overuse injuries like plantar fasciitis, tendonitis and impingement in the shoulder.

Exercisers and people alike get overuse injuries from doing the same exercises or activities over and over without much variety, and from doing exercises with incorrect form. With incorrect form, it's easy to see why exercisers get injuries, they put too much stress on a joint like the elbow, shoulder, knee or spine, and over time it begins to ache, or feel wrong when they are exercising. This is usually due to putting a joint in a weak position and asking it to perform in a way it wasn't meant to. As a fitness professional it's frustrating, because we see the problem a mile away, but the exerciser may not feel the prob-

lem for months or years, by then it's usually too late to exercise “pain free” in the affected joint. I believe this happens because when the individual first started lifting with bad form they felt fine, but over time the incorrect form wore down the joint and the pain began to bother them.

When an individual does the same exercises with out much variety, or doesn't have a balanced routine, the cause of the pain in the tissue is usually from too much of a good thing. The problem is that we can lose muscular balance. In other words the muscles that get too much work, over time end up doing most or all of the work, leaving the opposing muscles without much to do, those “left out” muscles tend to get stretched and weak. The example of someone who does 3 exercises for the chest and 1 for the back, may over time get shoulders that round forward and have pain during exercise or normal every day tasks like putting dishes away or lifting boxes.

Another common over use injury can be knee pain in people that run, or ride the exercise bike as their only form of cardio or leg workout. In this case we

sometimes see the knee cap slide toward the dominant quadriceps muscle (lets say it's the inside in this example), the muscle that helps balance the knee cap on the outside can become too weak to hold it in place against a strong inside muscle. This would cause discomfort and a feeling that something is not right in the knee.

It can be very frustrating to get sidelined by overuse injuries. However, it's awesome that with some minor adjustments and specialized exercises, people can usually get those injuries to subside or in some cases go away for ever. If you are someone who has one or more overuse injuries look back at your routine and analyze what you may be doing wrong, if everything seems okay, check to make sure you're doing about the same amount of work for each muscle group. Try different exercises, or seek the guidance of a fitness professional to restructure your routine or help you work around a lingering injury. I believe everyone can benefit from a professionally designed program and instruction in exercise technique.

JULY HEALTHY RECIPE SWISS ENCHILADAS

Ingredients:

Cooking spray
1 1/2 cups chopped onion
2 cups chopped roasted skinless, boneless chicken breast (about 2 breasts)
2 garlic cloves, minced
2 (4.5-ounce) cans diced green chiles, undrained
1 (14.5-ounce) can petite diced tomatoes, undrained
2 cups 2% reduced-fat milk
2 tablespoons all-purpose flour
1/4 teaspoon salt
6 (8-inch) fat-free flour tortillas
2 cups (8 ounces) shredded Swiss cheese

Heat a large nonstick skillet over medium-high heat. Coat pan with cooking spray. Add onion; cook 5 minutes or until tender, stirring occasionally. Stir in chicken, garlic, chiles, and tomatoes. Reduce heat, and simmer 7 minutes or until liquid evaporates. Set aside. Combine milk and flour in a small saucepan over medium-high heat; cook 5 minutes or until mixture thickens, stirring constantly with a whisk. Stir in salt. Spoon about 1/2 cup chicken mixture and about 2 1/2 tablespoons cheese down center of each tortilla; roll up. Arrange filled tortillas in the bottom of a 13 x 9-inch baking dish coated with cooking spray. Pour milk mixture over tortillas, and top evenly with remaining 1 cup cheese. Bake at 350° for 25 minutes or until cheese is bubbly. *Source:* Diane Webber, *Cooking Light*, May 2006.



Nutritional Information:

CALORIES 419(28% from fat); FAT 13.2g (sat 7.9g,mono 3.7g,poly 0.8g); PROTEIN 33.2g; CHOLESTEROL 79mg; CALCIUM 474mg; SODIUM 726mg; FIBER 4.3g; IRON 2.1mg; CARBOHYDRATE 41.8g

Mac Dodds Is an author, speaker, certified strength & conditioning specialist, and personal trainer Certified by the National Strength and Conditioning Association since 2002.

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