

Build Rock Hard Abs

There's no need to break your back to harden your gut. But it worked for this guy.

Guys with tank-tread stomachs come and go, but Owen McKibbin is different. He built his chiseled midsection while suffering from a broken back. Doctors think McKibbin, who has appeared on seven *Men's Health* covers (including November 2000), may have been born with a fractured vertebra in his lower back. Or he may have broken it in college while exercising with an injured ankle.

Either way, McKibbin carried that snapped bone around with him until a physician diagnosed it when he was 30. "The only thing that relieved the pain was keeping my stomach tight and my hamstrings loose," says McKibbin, now 35. He still works out six days a week, training his midsection and doing 45 minutes of hard aerobics. Here's McKibbin's three-part ab workout:

1. Cat back

A traditional yoga move, this exercise works the strap of muscles that runs from the top of your hip-bones to the bottom of your sternum. Rest on your hands and knees on a padded surface, with your hands (fists down) directly beneath your shoulders and your knees beneath your hips. Slowly raise your head toward the ceiling, and arch your back by pressing your midsection toward the floor (A).



Hold this starting position for a moment; then drop your head between your arms and suck in your gut to round your back(B). Pause and return to the starting position. Do three sets of 20 repetitions.

2. Crunch

Lie on your back with your hands behind your head, your fingers touching (but not interlocked). Bring your heels close to your butt, keep your knees together, and pigeon-toe your feet (A).



Lift your shoulders as if you were trying to touch your ribs to your pelvis (B). Pause for a second, then lower your shoulders (but don't relax your abs), and repeat. McKibbin breathes through his nose for a more effective crunch. Do one set of 25 reps.

3. Decline Curlup

This is tough, so start out using a decline bench (slant board) adjusted so it's almost flat. Lie on your back with your head near the top of the board, and grab the board above you. Bend your knees and lift your feet so they're close to your butt (A).



Slowly curl your knees toward your chest as you exhale (B). Inhale when you lower your hips. McKibbin does five sets of 20 reps; you should probably start with two sets of 15. Increase the angle of the decline bench as you gain strength.

Crunches (Basic and Advanced)

The grand-daddy of all abdominal exercises, crunches work the "rectus abdominis" or belly muscles.

Basic technique: Lie on your back with your hands crossed on your chest. Bend your knees at a 90-degree angle with your feet flat on the floor.

Lift your shoulders and curl your body forward, as if you were trying to touch your ribs to your pelvis.

Pause for a second, then lower your shoulders -- but don't relax your abs. Do three sets of 15 to 20 repetitions.

Do keep your lower back on the floor.

Don't clasp your hands behind your head.

Don't move quickly. Slow and steady works your abs harder.

Advanced technique: Here are two ways to make crunches more challenging to your abs.

1. Hold your body in the top position for an extra 3 or 4 seconds.
2. Hold a weight plate in place across your chest.

Circular Crunch

Trains all your abdominal muscles to contract at odd angles, which helps in sports where you have to run -- especially when you bob and cut.

Cup your hands lightly over your ears, then slowly raise your head, shoulders, and feet off the floor. This is your starting position.

From the starting position, move your knees in a circle (as seen if you were looking down from above). Do this three times in each direction, making as wide a circle as

you can.

Follow this exercise immediately with the Figure 8 Crunch.

Figure-Eight Crunch

Works all the abdominal muscles, strengthening your torso for twisting during running. This is also helpful for moves such as kicking a soccer ball and hitting a slap shot.

Cup your hands lightly over your ears, then slowly raise your head, shoulders, and feet off the floor. This is your starting position.

From the starting position, move your knees in a wide figure-eight motion (as seen if you were looking down from above).

Do three repetitions in one direction, then reverse the motion for three more repetitions.

Straight-Arm Crunch

Trains your rectus abdominis and obliques (belly muscles and side torso muscles) to contract with great force, developing overhead power for tennis serves, baseball throws, and volleyball spikes.

(A) Lie in a crunch position and hold the medicine ball high above your face.

(B) Raise your head and shoulders off the floor, and hold the crunch for 5 seconds. Do three repetitions.

(C) Alternate this movement to the left and right for three repetitions on each side.

Torso Twist

Trains the internal and external obliques, the muscles on either side of your torso, which help you swing a bat, a golf club, or a racquet.

How to do it:

Lie on your back, with your knees bent at a 90-degree angle and your feet flat on the floor. Squeeze a light 2 to 5-pound medicine ball (at sporting goods stores) or a thick phone book tightly between your knees.

(A) Cup your hands lightly over your ears, then slowly raise your head, shoulders, and feet off the floor. This is your starting position.

(B) Slowly lower your knees to the right until you feel a comfortable stretch (about halfway to the floor). Hold this position for 5 seconds, then lift your knees back to the center.

(C) Lower your knees to the left for 5 seconds. Do six twists to each side.

Follow this exercise immediately with the **Circular Crunch**.

Weighted Crunch

Hardens your rectus abdominis and obliques (belly muscles and side torso muscles), so you can absorb impacts during contact sports such as martial arts, boxing, football (and letting your 5-year-old nephew hit you in the stomach to show him what a badass you are).

Lie on your back with your knees bent and your feet flat on the floor.

(A) Hold the ball between your palms, resting it on your forehead. Keep your elbows out to your sides.

(B) Slowly raise your head and shoulders off the floor, hold the position for 5 seconds, then lower yourself. Do three repetitions.

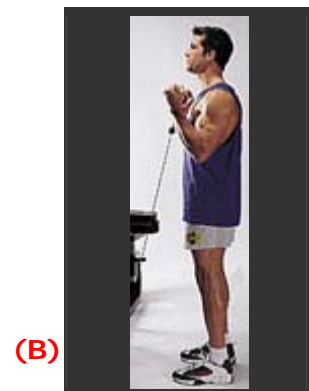
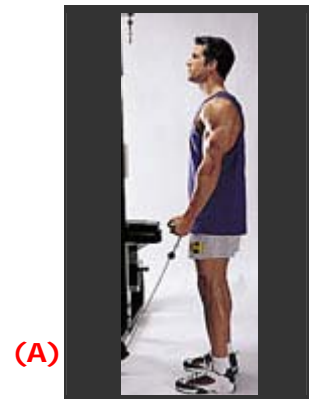
(C) Now perform the crunch again, but rotate your head and shoulders slightly as you rise, alternating left and right for six repetitions. Repeat the entire set of nine repetitions -- center, left, and right -- three times.

1-1/4 Cable Curl (biceps)

An isolation exercise that works the biceps

This is a two-step, double-duty biceps exercise that works just as well with a barbell. [For a dumbbell variation, click here.](#)

Step One (A to B): For the first half of the repetition, curl your arms up as shown.



Step Two (C to D): Instead of letting your arms return to the start position as you would in a regular biceps curl, lower them only one-quarter of the way down -- then curl them back up again.

(C)



This extra move forces your biceps to contract twice on each repetition, increasing their "peak."

(D)



How many?

Do one to three sets, with four to six slow repetitions in each set.

Keep your form.

During the exercise, keep your back straight, head up, and don't swivel your hips like Ricky Martin. If you can't lift the weight without doing some kind of body gyrations, reduce the weight and try again.

Here's a variation with dumbbells.

(A) In either a seated or standing position, hold a pair of dumbbells with your palms facing up. With your left arm, curl one dumbbell until your forearm is parallel to the ground; that arm should form a 90-degree angle with your torso. **Hold this position.**



(B) With your right arm, do six to 10 curls -- each going the full range of motion. Switch arm positions; do two or three sets on each side.



Why this works: When you alternate dumbbells in the full up-and-down motion, every time you curl one arm, your other arm has a chance to take a breather.

"For the most growth, you should be putting your biceps under continuous tension throughout the whole set," says Michael Mejia, CSCS.

45-Degree Dumbbell Raise

Q: My shoulders look good from the front, but from the back they look like my little sister's. Are there any exercises that will give me more definition back there? -- Gary K., 17

A: If you want to look great on your way out the door, hit the rear head of the deltoid, the muscle at the top of your back, just below your shoulder.

To do that, do the following exercises as a pair, resting 15 seconds after each set. If you're pressed for time, you can do the pair in between sets of bench presses.

(A) Lie facedown on an incline bench with a light dumbbell in each hand, your thumbs pointing forward.



(B) Lift the weights up and outward at a 45-degree angle. (It's hard to tell in the photo, but if you looked at this guy from overhead, his arms would be making a wide **V** -- not just pointing straight ahead.)



Spreading your arms at a 45-degree angle is what makes this exercise really tough, so 5 to 8 pounds is enough weight. Do two or three sets of eight to 12 repetitions.

Then do this move if you have access to a gym: Using a rope attachment, sit at a cable-row station. Keeping your back straight, pull the rope up toward your neck rather than toward your chest. At the end of the movement (when the rope is at chin level), your upper arms should be parallel to the floor. Do two or three sets of eight to 12 repetitions.

Get Bigger Arms

The best exercise for growing big triceps

Before you spend all your sweat doing biceps curls, remember that it's your triceps that really add size to your arms. The California press is one of the most effective exercises for overloading the triceps, says Charles Poliquin, M.S., a strength coach for Olympic athletes in Canada.

You can lift more weight than you can with other common triceps exercises, so you'll build bigger arms faster. "Power lifters often use this exercise when they hit a plateau," he explains.

To do a California press, lie on your back on a bench, with your feet flat on the floor. Grab a light barbell with your hands about 10 to 12 inches apart.

Now, with your elbows slightly bent, position the barbell so that it's directly over the center of your chest. Keeping your elbows close to your sides, lower the barbell to the top of your chest, near your collarbone. (That's right, you'll lower it at a slight angle.)



When the barbell touches your chest, your forearms should be flat against your biceps. Pause, then slowly press the bar up and out to begin again. Do two or three sets of 12 repetitions, and add weight gradually.



Bicep Curls Done Right

If you want 'em to look like baseballs, don't cheat.

Biceps curls are like omelettes: The concept is so simple that it's hard to understand how people screw it up. Usually it's because they've never learned the secrets that guarantee success.

For omelettes, it's timing the flip. For curls, it's keeping it strict. John Graham, C.S.C.S., an exercise physiologist in Allentown, Pennsylvania, gave us his recipe for the perfect muscle-building curl. Do three sets twice a week.

1. Stay in line. Holding two light dumbbells (start with each one at 10 percent of your weight), stand straight, with your feet in line with your shoulders.

Pin your elbows against your rib cage. Your palms should face straight out. Your shoulders, elbows, and wrists should be aligned. If you have lower-back problems, do this while seated.

2. Lift, but don't twist. Keeping your back straight and your elbows pinned against you, slowly begin curling the right dumbbell up. Don't twist the dumbbell as you curl.

"If you rotate it, you're using more momentum than muscle," says Graham. If you can't lift the dumbbell past the midpoint without moving your elbow or leaning back, it's too heavy.

3. Count to four. Raise the dumbbell slightly above your chest without moving your elbow forward, and then squeeze your biceps muscle. It should take you 4 seconds to reach the top.

Always look straight ahead as you curl. "If you look down, your shoulders will hunch forward, making the curl less effective," says Graham.

4. Lower, then lift. Lower the dumbbell to a count of four, pause for 1 second, then curl up the left dumbbell. "If you lift the left dumbbell as you lower the right one,"

Graham says, "it gives you more leverage and makes you sway."

Keep alternating arms for 12 repetitions each. Use heavier weights when you can do 13 repetitions on the third set.

Dumbbell Draw

Functional exercise that works the biceps and the brachialis (on the outside edge of the biceps)

Grab a dumbbell in each hand and stand with your feet shoulder-width apart. With your right palm facing forward, slowly pull the dumbbell up and in line with the side of your body, bending your elbow and extending it behind your body. The dumbbell should be tucked below your armpit.



Next, bring your elbow down past your waist and up, so it's pointing directly in front of you and your upper arm is parallel to the floor. The dumbbell should be nearly touching the top of your shoulder.

Pause for a moment. Then, keeping your elbow bent, reverse the rotation, bringing your elbow down and back until it is once again pointing directly behind you. Slowly lower the weight until it's next to your thigh. Do 10 to 12 repetitions, and then switch arms. Do 2 or 3 sets.



Dumbbell Bench Press w/Twist

If you want to add muscle to your chest, dumbbell bench presses do the job quickly.

But one subtle adjustment to the standard move will help you build even more brawn: **Slowly rotate the weights inward as you push them up, so your elbows are closer together when your arms are fully extended.**

"This forces your chest muscles to contract more powerfully during the press," explains fitness expert Wayne Westcott, PhD. And that means you'll develop more muscle with fewer repetitions.

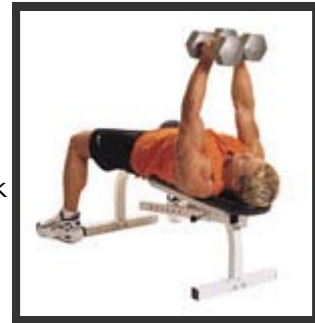
How to do it:

Lie on a bench with your feet flat on the floor. Hold the dumbbells with your palms facing your knees, your elbows pointing straight out and bent 90 degrees.



As you raise the dumbbells, slowly turn your fists inward so that your knuckles face each other when your arms are fully extended. Contract your chest muscles forcefully for 1 full second, then lower the dumbbells as you rotate your hands back to their starting position.

Do two sets of 10 repetitions, and use heavier dumbbells when you can do 12 repetitions easily.



Full Kickback

Functional exercise that works the entire triceps (back of upper arm)

Attach a handle to the high cable of a pulley station and stand facing the tower with your feet about shoulder-width apart. Using an overhand grip, grab the handle with your right hand.

Keeping your arm rigid and your elbow slightly bent, pull the handle straight down, past your right hip, and then behind your body.

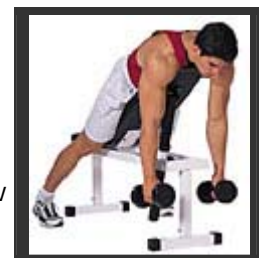
Continue moving your arm as far behind you as possible. Pause, and then slowly bring your arm back to the starting position. Do 10 to 12 repetitions, then switch arms. Work up to 2 or 3 sets per arm.



Lying Incline Curls

An isolation exercise that works the biceps

Grab a dumbbell in each hand and lie facedown on an incline bench adjusted to a 45-degree angle. Place your feet on the floor and allow your arms to hang straight down, with your palms facing in.



Slowly curl your right arm under the bench and diagonally across your body toward your left elbow, then return to the starting position. Repeat with your left arm. Do 2 or 3 sets of 10 to 12 repetitions.

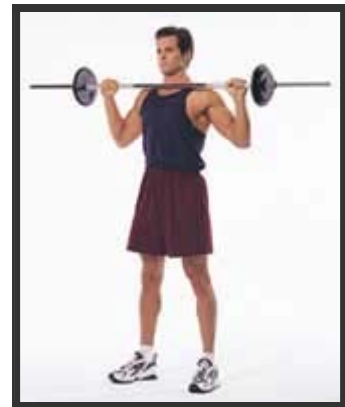


The Military Press

A great muscle-building exercise, as long as you do it right.

Wanna look like G.I. Joe? The military press can help you get there. Do it right and it can strengthen your deltoids and triceps. Do it wrong, though, and it can mess up your shoulders and turn your arms into soggy noodles. Here are some handy tips to doing it right.

Position your feet a few inches wider than shoulder-width apart. And yes, you should do it while standing. Sitting takes away the shock absorption provided by the legs and puts too much pressure on the spine. There's no need to lift your heels to assist with the press.



Your elbows are the key to proper hand spacing. In the down position, grab the bar so your arms are bent at approximately 45-degree angles.

The bar should be even with your shoulders. Lowering it to your chest can cause injury. Discomfort at the top, back or front of the shoulder means your form is off.

Press the weight from in front of your shoulders, not from behind. Use a weight that lets you perform two sets of eight repetitions. Delicate shoulder muscles can't handle more than that.

Raise the weight until your arms are almost completely extended but not locked. The barbell should be above your head; letting it go back behind your head may cause rotator-cuff damage.

Keep your wrists straight. Bent wrists become injured wrists.

Keep your eyes facing ahead. If you crane your neck, you risk straining it. Use a mirror to keep an eye on your form.

Keep your back straight to minimize stress on the lower-back muscles.

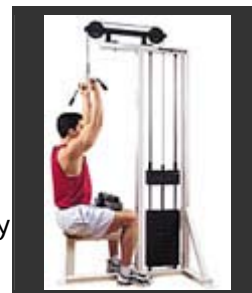


Your knees should be straight. This is a shoulder exercise, so leave your lower body out of the action.

Biceps Pulldown

Functional exercise that works the biceps and the brachialis (on the outside edge of the biceps)

Sit at a lat pulldown station with your knees underneath the pads and your feet flat on the floor. With your back straight and arms fully extended, grab the bar with an underhand grip that's a few inches narrower than shoulder-width apart.



Now, looking straight ahead, slowly pull the bar straight down, bending your elbows, until the bar is just underneath your chin (imagine you're doing a pullup). Hold for a moment, then slowly return the bar to the starting position. Do 2 or 3 sets of 10 to 12 repetitions.



The Pullup Workout It's painful, but it pays off

Pullups are torture, but if you want to build a big upper body, there's no better exercise. Bill Sands, Ph.D., an exercise physiologist at the University of Utah, gave us a beginner's program that's sure to make you sore -- and strong. Here it is.

First, use an overhand grip on the bar (palms facing away from you), with your hands shoulder-width apart. Slowly pull yourself up until your chin passes the bar. Lower yourself, and repeat until your form falters; your total is your maximum repetitions.

Then, do three sets of pullups for three workouts per week. Follow this program, and refigure your maximum repetitions every four weeks.

Week One: Start by doing 60 percent of your maximum (if your max is 10, do 6 pullups) for three sets.

Week Two: Add one rep to each set, but use an underhand grip that's slightly wider than your shoulders.

Week Three: Using an overhand grip, grab the bar 4 inches wider than your shoulders on each side. Add another rep to each set.

Week Four: Resume your shoulder-width overhand grip, adding one rep.

Shrug and Raise

Functional exercise that develops the upper back and entire shoulder

Stand with your arms at your sides, your palms facing inward, and a dumbbell in each hand. Raise your shoulders toward your ears.

Keeping your shoulders shrugged, bend your elbows at 90-degree angles and lift the weights to your sides in a motion similar to the one you use for a lateral raise.

Your arms should go no higher than your shoulders. Return to the starting position. Do two sets of 10 repetitions.

Side Kickout

Isolation exercise that works the entire triceps (back of upper arm)

Grab a dumbbell in your right hand and stand with a bench by your left side. With your knees slightly bent, feet shoulder-width apart, lean forward at the waist so that your upper body is at a 45-degree angle to the floor; brace your left hand on the bench. Now raise the upper part of your right arm out to the side, so it is nearly parallel to the floor, but keep your elbow bent at a right angle. This is the starting position.

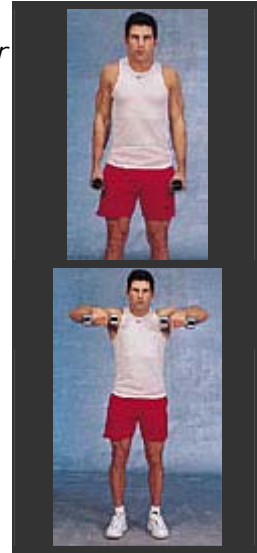
Side-Lying Raise

Functional exercise that develops the side and rear shoulder muscles

Lie on your side on an incline bench or slant board that's tilted at a 5- to 60-degree angle. With your left hand, hold a dumbbell at your side.

Raise the weight until your arm almost reaches a 90-degree angle with your body. Hold for 1 second, then return to the starting position. Do two sets of eight to 10 repetitions on each side.

Single-Arm Pulley Row



Functional exercise that works the entire triceps (back of upper arm)

Stand facing a pulley station with your feet shoulder-width apart. Flex your knees and bend forward slightly, bracing your left hand on your right thigh.

With an overhand grip, grab the handle in your right hand and slowly pull it up to your chest. This is the starting position.



Keeping your arm close to your body, extend your forearm behind you. Pause, and then bring the handle back to your chest. Do 10 to 12 repetitions, then switch arms. Work up to 2 or 3 sets per arm.

Standing Cable Row

A functional exercise that works the shoulders and upper back

Sometimes an optical illusion can be your friend. To make your waist look smaller, develop your shoulders and upper back muscles. Building these will help give you that classic "wedge" look.

Don't have access to a cable machine? Attach an elastic cord to a low support. (Road bike inner tubes work in a pinch, or go to a fitness supply store and buy the real thing.) Note: Skip this exercise if you have lower-back problems.



(A) Fasten the rope handle to the low pulley of a cable machine set to a light weight. Grip the handle firmly with both hands. Move back until the weight is engaged when your arms are extended. Stand with your feet parallel and hip-width apart. Bend forward about 45 degrees, keeping the natural arc in your back.



(B) Pull the rope toward your upper chest until your elbows are even with your shoulders. As you pull, squeeze your shoulder blades together and hold for a full second. Return to the starting position without releasing the tension in your shoulders.



Do two sets of 10 repetitions, and add weight when you can easily do 12 repetitions.