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# Can seriously firm and flatten, too—if you make these simple tweaks.

By LESLEY ROTCHFORD

## During yoga

Women who do 15 minutes of yoga three times a week for eight weeks significantly improved their ab strength compared with women who did 55 minutes of other exercise, researchers at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse found. At the end of the study, the yogis were able to do 14 more ab curl-ups than the other participants. Holding poses requires major core engagement, the study authors say.

To maximize ab sculpting, try doing uddiyana bandha, which involves gently pulling your belly toward your spine at the end of each exhale. "This activates and strengthens the transverse abdominis (your deepest ab muscle)," says Loren Bassett, a yoga instructor for Equinox in Dallas. "Hold poses for five or 10 ujjayi breaths, where each inhale and exhale

lasts five counts," Bassett says. "You'll build strength isometrically because your abs have to work to keep you in proper position."

If you're doing a faster-paced class, focus on your form. "When you're flowing through poses quickly, the common tendency is to arch your back," says Heidi Kristoffer, the creator of CrossFlowX, a yoga class in New York City. "Focus on keeping your spine straight—think about lengthening your tailbone and pulling in your front ribs—to keep your abs engaged."

Also, emphasize planks. They target the rectus (the washboard muscles) and transverse abdominis, as well as the erector spinae, the set of back muscles that are part of your core, Bassett says. Side planks might be even better, because they

hit all those muscles plus the obliques. "When you're in any plank, you have to engage your abs to prevent your back from arching or dipping," Bassett says. A study in the *Journal of Strength and Conditioning Research* found that plank variations (where feet are wide and one arm reaches forward) engaged the rectus abdominis and obliques by 27 percent more than flexion exercises (such as sit-ups) or extension ab exercises (such as single-leg extensions).

**TIGHTEN TIP**  
To turn on your abs during every yoga pose, draw your belly in toward your spine as you exhale, Kristoffer says.



## While you lift

Do a biceps curl with three-pound weights. Feel anything in your core? Didn't think so. Curl something heavier, like 10-pounders, and your abs will contract to steady your body as you rep. The lesson: Heavier weights can lead to a flatter belly, says Courtney Paul, a trainer at YG Studios in New York City. Beyond lifting heavier, you can maximize ab sculpting throughout your entire strength-training workout by making a few subtle form adjustments.

To begin, when doing upper-body moves like biceps curls, triceps extensions, and overhead presses, keep your ribs "closed." (When ribs are "open," they poke forward and your abs turn off, so keep your spine long and neutral and your abs fully engaged.) "This will ensure that your rectus abdominis stays firm and contracted throughout the move," says Michele Olson, Ph.D., a professor of exercise physiology at Auburn University at Montgomery.

just touches it. Do your reps in this position. "It will force your abs to fire isometrically while you do the moves," Olson says.

And you may want to add in more single-leg exercises. Balancing can indirectly work abs by turning them on to help stabilize your body. For example, single-leg dead lifts fire up your obliques to keep you balanced as you hinge from your hips and extend one leg behind you while lowering a weight toward the floor with the opposite hand.

Whatever you do, don't slouch. Omri Rachmut, a trainer for Barry's Bootcamp in New York City, emphasizes perfect posture during every lift. "Keeping your head, shoulders, and hips aligned allows your core muscles to work more efficiently while you train," he says.

## In Spinning

Take Laurie Cole's SoulCycle class in New York City and you'll be told to hold a one-minute plank before you pedal. This wakes up your abs and cues you to keep them tight, she says. Otherwise, they may cruise lazily through class, while your butt and legs do the work.

When you're in the saddle and riding at a moderate intensity, your ab muscles are continuously engaged at relatively low levels (about 8 percent of muscular voluntary contraction, to be exact), according to a study in the *Journal of Applied Biomechanics*. So for added belly burn during class, draw in your stomach from the rib cage while squeezing the muscles directly below and around the belly button, which keeps your abs engaged, says Monique Berarducci, a SoulCycle instructor in Greenwich, Connecticut. Then kick up your intensity and you've

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For lower-body moves, including squats and lunges, focus on pulling up your pelvic floor muscles with each rep (pretend you have to pee and that you need to hold it). This will engage the hard-