

## Genes stacked against women wanting six-packs

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In honor of my little sister's 16th birthday today, I am going to print one of her questions. No, she is not a student here (yet), but her question is definitely pertinent, as her quest for visible abs is one shared by copious amounts of female students here (and everywhere).

Q: I do 100 crunches every night before bed, but I can't seem to get a six-pack. Is there some special exercise I should be doing? Am I doing something wrong?

- Gretchen Asaff, Larchmont, NY

A: Ladies (and gentlemen, since it would probably suit you guys well to understand this in order to have an objective response next time your girlfriend complains about having a little bit of a tummy), there are many fundamental differences between male and female anatomy. Skipping the obvious ones, I would like to focus on the different ways in which male and female bodies are predisposed to storing fat.

As a rule of thumb, females generally have higher percentages of body fat than males. This is due to a number of factors, ranging from evolutionary to hormonal. But let's just say that this biological predisposition to store more fat than a male makes it difficult for females to achieve that ultra-ripped look (read: a six-pack on a girl is the result of a genetic gift combined with lots of hard work).

According to the American Council on Exercise, the percentage of body fat for a female that is deemed essential for survival is around 10 to 12 percent, whereas the essential range for a male is a mere two to four percent. A healthy (i.e. physically fit) woman should have a body fat range of 21 to 24 percent, while a male should have one in the 14 to 17 percent range. As you can see, men can get a six pack more easily for biological reasons - so women, don't get discouraged that your stomach isn't razor cut. Many women can only achieve a certain level of tone and may never even see actual abdominal muscles.

Now the second issue: exercise-induced spot reduction. This myth just will not die. This untruth is based on the fallacious idea that working the heck out of a specific part of the body (in this case, the abdominal region) will decrease the amount of fat deposited there. So what about the legions of spandex-clad students doing crunches until they pass out? This practice will not only have a minimal effect on abdominal fat, but it can easily lead to over training and injury.

The only way to reduce body fat - barring the use of illicit substances - is to manipulate your caloric intake/output ratio so that you burn more calories than you consume. In other words, try cutting some of the junk food out of your diet, and do three to four cardio sessions every week. This will induce fat loss in areas all over the body. However, you will not lose fat from one specific area at a time.

Rather, depending on your genetic make-up, you will notice a general reduction of overall body fat that may be more pronounced in some places than others. Some people initially lose more fat in places other than their abs, so don't get discouraged if you see fat loss in parts of your body other than your stomach. Many women lose fat first in their hip/thigh region. So be patient and results will come.

As far as some special exercise that will get you a six pack, each abdominal exercise has its advantages and its drawbacks. When targeting the abs, be sure to develop a good burn through maintenance of proper form. Combine this with regular cardio and you'll be well on your way to a flatter, firmer stomach (though, because of the aforementioned reasons, a six pack might be tough to achieve).

As for laying off junk food, Gretchen, you can start that tomorrow. Happy birthday and enjoy your cake