

Ab fab

Despite our best efforts, most of us can pinch an inch or two on our tums. Here, celebrity personal trainer Michael Garry unlocks the secrets to really burning the fat around our middles – and revealing a trimmer, more toned tummy in just a few weeks.

Why is belly fat such a tough cookie? Unfortunately, there are a number of reasons we accumulate it, especially with age, says celebrity personal trainer Michael Garry (*michaalgarry.london*). 'We naturally lose muscle as we get older. This slows down metabolism, and we store more fat, particularly around the abdominal area. Hormones also affect fat storage.' The menopause, for example, is often associated with weight gain around the middle.

Another suspect is diet. 'Abs start at the table,' Michael explains. 'If our diet is high in refined carbohydrates, such as pasta and bread, we produce more insulin and fat-storing hormones. Even marathon runners can find fat lurking on their bellies, and carbohydrates are often to blame. When we run, we need carbohydrates for energy, so we crave them. If we want to reduce stubborn fat, we need to do more strength training, and protein is what we need to eat for that. Eating more protein is one way to balance cravings for carbohydrates.'

Alcohol consumption may also be partly to blame. 'Alcoholic drinks can be high in calories, and have a knock-on effect on our diet,' Michael points out. He recommends clients look at the effect alcohol has on them after 48 hours. 'It's likely they'll crave refined carbohydrates. One of the effects of alcohol is it makes us feel tired, and when we feel tired, we crave sugar.'

Ab action

The secret to a trim waist is a multi-pronged approach, Michael says. This means combining a healthy diet with cardio exercise, strength or resistance training and ab exercises – and being wise to the common misconception that ab exercises burn fat. 'It's cardio exercise and weight training that does this. Don't underestimate the impact of weight training, which can include using weights or your own body weight. We can look at the muscles on our body as coals on a fire. The more coals/muscles we have, the higher the flame/metabolism. Muscles burn fat away. Ab exercises will only tone muscles for a defined mid section.'

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Aim for a varied exercise routine, advises Michael. 'Circuit training is excellent for abs. It speeds up metabolism and works muscles. Remember to check you're doing each of the exercises correctly, which can be trickier if you're a beginner or tired.' If you enjoy sports, some that work the ab area well, Michael says, are tennis, volleyball, netball, basketball and football. 'Any sport that gets us moving dynamically is good news for abs.'

For those interested in anatomy, the muscles we're especially looking to tone are: the *Rectus abdominis* (which run down the front of our stomachs), the obliques (on our sides) and the *Transverse abdominis* (the muscles that pull our tummy button towards our spine). 'We need to train the lower back too, not just the abdominal area. If we only train our front, we create an imbalance, which may lead to injury. We have to work our *Erector spinae* and *Multifidus* muscles (which run up the back) as well.'

In his training sessions with clients, Michael will often include a run, ab exercises and weight training. 'I do them in that order because it's easy to overdo it with running and weight training. If we leave our ab exercises until the end, by the time we get to them, we can feel too tired. Then we tend to put them off until tomorrow – or skip them entirely. The best time to do them is straight after cardio.' Alternatively, he suggests, do ab exercises on rest days when you're not doing any cardio or weight training.

Belly benefits

It's worth remembering that it's not just for appearance's sake that we might want to reduce a tubby tummy. As Michael explains, 'There are health risks linked to the fat we carry around our middles. Heart disease, type 2 diabetes and colon cancer have all been associated with abdominal fat. It's now even thought there's a link to Alzheimer's disease.'

As an added bonus, exercising may help with bloating and water retention. 'Women can put on 1-1.5kg as their hormones fluctuate over the month, but they can also lose that very quickly. As with alcohol, hormones can see us reaching for refined carbohydrates like biscuits or toast more than usual. If you know this is going to happen, plan for it by surrounding yourself with healthy snacks.' That way, you're less likely to fall into the trap of refined carbohydrates, and stand the best chance of reaping the benefits of your hard work. 🍌

Add these exercises into your routine, building up the number of repetitions each time.



SWISS BALL CRUNCH

Keep arms to your side or crossed on your chest. Avoid putting hands behind your head to help avoid neck strain. Exhale as you sit up. Inhale as you sit back.



SWISS BALL BACK EXTENSION

Press feet against a wall for this exercise. The wider apart your legs, the easier it will be. To make it more challenging, move them together. Squeeze your glute (bottom) muscles as you lift your torso from the waist.



SUPERMAN

Keep your legs straight and reach out your fingertips. Keep your neck in line with your spine. Variation: raise and lower your right arm and left leg together, then your left arm and right leg.



PLANK

For a forearm plank, keep elbows aligned with shoulders, and forearms parallel with the body, shoulder-width apart. Planks can be performed with knees on the ground (easier, good for beginners) and/or with straight arms. Build up the amount of time you can hold this position, aiming for 60-90 seconds.



REVERSE CURL

Bend your knees into your stomach, then straighten legs fully to extend, soles of the feet towards the ceiling. Lift your bottom and hips off the floor smoothly without swinging.



BICYCLE

Touch your fingers lightly to the side of your head. Don't knit them together behind it. Think about bringing your shoulder to your knee, rather than just your elbow.



SIDE PLANK

Concentrate on keeping your body in a straight line from feet to head. Don't let your hips drop in position. Balance on the side of your foot, not the sole.