

MID-BODY CRISIS?

A TRIM WAISTLINE IS NOT ONLY SEXY; IT IS ALSO A GOOD INDICATOR OF YOUR OVERALL FITNESS. NAWAZ MODI TELLS YOU HOW TO GET ONE

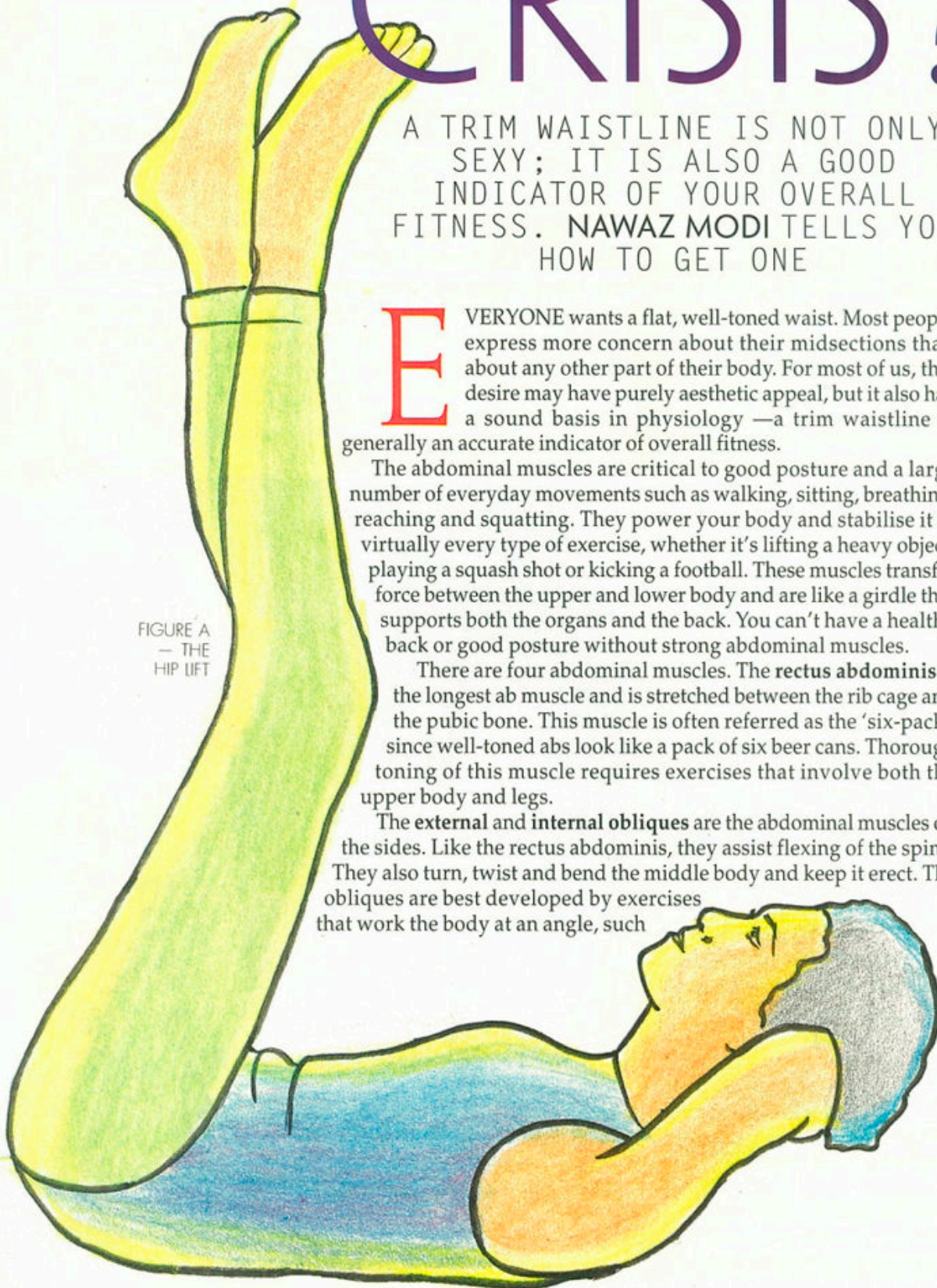
EVERYONE wants a flat, well-toned waist. Most people express more concern about their midsections than about any other part of their body. For most of us, this desire may have purely aesthetic appeal, but it also has a sound basis in physiology—a trim waistline is generally an accurate indicator of overall fitness.

The abdominal muscles are critical to good posture and a large number of everyday movements such as walking, sitting, breathing, reaching and squatting. They power your body and stabilise it in virtually every type of exercise, whether it's lifting a heavy object, playing a squash shot or kicking a football. These muscles transfer force between the upper and lower body and are like a girdle that supports both the organs and the back. You can't have a healthy back or good posture without strong abdominal muscles.

There are four abdominal muscles. The **rectus abdominis** is the longest ab muscle and is stretched between the rib cage and the pubic bone. This muscle is often referred as the 'six-pack', since well-toned abs look like a pack of six beer cans. Thorough toning of this muscle requires exercises that involve both the upper body and legs.

The **external** and **internal obliques** are the abdominal muscles on the sides. Like the rectus abdominis, they assist flexing of the spine. They also turn, twist and bend the middle body and keep it erect. The obliques are best developed by exercises that work the body at an angle, such

FIGURE A
— THE
HIP LIFT



as diagonal crunches (figures 3 and 4).

Even the most well exercised abdominals cannot totally tame a bulging belly area, as this is one of the prime sites of fat storage. The best way of keeping it to a minimum is a combination of a sensible, calorie-limited diet, aerobic activity and toning exercises.

FIG 1: THE AB CRUNCH



FIG 2: THE AB CRUNCH



FIG 3: THE DIAGONAL CRUNCH



FIG 4: THE DIAGONAL CRUNCH

There is no 'best' exercise, as no single movement can maximally engage all the muscles involved in toning the midsection. More than one exercise is required to just work the rectus abdominis thoroughly.

A FEW POINTERS

- * inhale during the relaxation phase and exhale during exertion.
- * Not returning completely to a rest position will help keep tension in the muscles throughout the exercise.
- * Don't let gravity pull you down to earth. Instead, roll down as slowly as possible. This will also protect the back from being strained.

* Increase the number of repetitions and sets slowly as you get stronger and better conditioned. You may initially take a break of about 10-15 seconds in between sets.

* Hold each contraction for about two seconds before releasing it.

* Before embarking on the programme below, remember that all exercises are not suited to all people, especially if you suffer from back or neck problems. It would be best to take the advice of a fitness professional or expert before you begin.

Warm Up

Warming up ensures safety and gets the abdominal muscles ready to work. It isn't necessary to stretch the abdominal muscles themselves. They are regularly stretched as

you stand, sit, breathe and move around.

You could warm up by marching or jogging in place for five to eight minutes or performing some other aerobic activity like aerobic dance or riding a stationary bike.

THE EXERCISES

The Ab Crunch: The ab crunch is one of the most effective and safe exercises. It avoids straining the lower back and, if done correctly, without jerking the neck, the upper cervical area also remains protected.

To perform the basic crunch, lie with both legs slightly apart and bent at about a 90 degree angle. This supports and protects the back. If the crunch is done with your legs straight, you seriously risk straining the lower back. At least one, if not both legs, should be bent. Slowly lift the head and shoulders off the floor using the abdominal muscles, raising yourself up to the bottom of your shoulder blades.

Arm positions can vary the intensity of the exercise. To reduce it, extend the arms forward (figure 1). To increase the intensity, fold your arms across your chest (fig 2).

Be careful not to jerk the neck up as you lift. Exhale as you lift and inhale on the way down. Don't try hard to hold the feet down. This only pressurises the hip flexor muscles (located where the leg meets the main body on the anterior side) and detracts from the work of the abdominals.

Do three sets of eight each to start with.

The Diagonal Crunch: This utilises the internal and external obliques. These are the muscles that shape the sides of your waist. Their main function is to twist and turn the upper torso.

Begin with the head and shoulders slightly raised (fig 3). Let your left ankle rest on your right knee and twist your right elbow toward your left knee (fig 4). Exhale as you lift and inhale as you lower. Do two sets of eight each to start with, before switching over to the other side.

The Hip Lift: This exercise targets the lower abdominal area (the belly).

Lie on your back with legs raised and ankles crossed, head lifted and supported by the hands (fig A). Be careful not to jerk the head. Contract the lower abdominals to lift your hip area slightly off the floor as you breathe out. Breathe in as you relax. Do three sets of eight each to start with.