



# Great Abs with Pilates

by Beth Downey

Some of the most challenging Pilates exercises are performed on the mat. What some call the “fabulous five” are also known as the stomach series. The Stomach Series is a progression of five abdominal exercises that works the abdominals with varying degrees of load away from the center of your body. This series only takes minutes to perform yet develops strength, coordination and flexibility all at once. By creating oppositional energy within the body, your muscles are lengthened and your joints are decompressed. In addition, arms, hips, and thighs become toned as they move, while the abdominals constantly engage as they stabilize your torso. The bonus... your abdominals will become rock hard!

## THE UPPER AB CURL (UAC)

All five exercises are done in a supine position (on your back) with your head up and your movement supported by your core. The position of the upper body is important so there is no compression on the neck and shoulders. This position is known as the “upper ab curl” because it is the curving of the spine that lifts the head. Instead of lifting the weight of the head with the neck and shoulders, imagine that your upper body is a curling ocean wave. Let your deep abdominals be the powerful undertow that lifts the wave. Move your head in concert with your spine leaving enough space under your chin to squeeze a tangerine and the lower tips of your shoulder blades evenly balanced on the mat.

To get into the UAC position, begin by placing the palms of your hands behind your head on the base of your skull. Lift your head, squeeze the tangerine under your chin, feel the weight of your head in your hands as you contract your upper abs and lift through your upper back to the tips of your shoulder blades. Repeat this movement several times to feel your upper abdominals working. You are now prepared to start the stomach series, often referred to as the “belly busters”. Always remember to lower your head onto the mat if your neck fatigues.

### 1. Single Leg Stretch

#### THE ACTION:

Inhale to prepare and exhale as you lift into your upper ab curl (UAC) with right knee bent into your chest straight over your right hip. Place your right hand on the right ankle and left hand on the right knee. The other leg is lengthened out at a safe diagonal supported by the lower abs. Keep elbows out

and wide anchored by your lats. Alternate legs and hand positions keeping your hips stable and rooted to the mat. Think of the ‘sitz bones’ at the base of your pelvis acting as pistons propelling the legs out. Be careful not to torque your knee as you bend it.

Always keep your abs scooped and try not to compress either the hip or the back of knee as the knee bends. Think of creating oppositional energy through the connection of your hands to the legs.

#### MODIFICATIONS

**Beginner:** Keep head on mat, take legs alternately to 90 degrees straight to the ceiling, with hands behind thighs instead of on shins.

**Intermediate:** Head up, legs alternately to 45 degrees.  
**Advanced:** Head up, legs alternately to height of eyes.  
Reps: 5-8 on each leg. Inhale for 2 leg movements and exhale for same.

### 2. Double Leg Stretch

#### THE ACTION:

Inhale on your back with both knees bent toward chest, hands on each shin, and exhale into your UAC. Inhale and extend both legs out at diagonal, while simultaneously reaching both arms long by your ears. Exhale and then circle arms back to shins as legs draw into body squeezing your inner thighs. Keep your pelvis and lower back lengthened and stable on the mat. Anchor your shoulder blades to move your arms.



Double leg stretch is more difficult than single leg stretch as your core must support the entire weight of all four limbs extended from center. A common error is arching the low back or drifting backwards from the upper ab curl position. Work your abs to maintain your position!

#### MODIFICATIONS:

**Beginner:** Keep legs at higher diagonal and hands behind back of thighs rather than on shins.

**Intermediate:** Lower leg diagonal and extend arms at sides of hips. When ready, extend arms by ears.

**Advanced:** Legs at height of eyes.

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Reps: 5-8 Inhale to extend legs and arms, exhale to bend knees in.

### 3. Scissors

#### THE ACTION:

Inhale on your back as you prepare and exhale to reach into your UAC. Extend one leg to ceiling holding the back of the leg with both hands near the knees, and the other leg extended toward floor. Gently pull the raised leg toward you twice while keeping space in front of the hip. Switch legs and keep the abdominals pulled toward the spine. Move the legs fluidly while keeping the hips and upper body stable. Imagine the toes making an arch in space as they scissor past each other.

#### MODIFICATIONS:

**Beginner:** Do not do this if you can't keep your head up. If

you are able to keep head up, can modify by not lowering leg past 45°.

**Intermediate to**

**Advanced:** Keep moving the hands higher up the leg to increase difficulty without overusing the shoulders.

Reps: 5-8 on each leg. Inhale on one leg. Exhale on the other.

Pictured below: Scissors



*Note: The next two exercises are more advanced and should not be performed by a beginner or someone with back issues.*

### 4. Double Leg Lower Lift

#### THE ACTION:

Lie on your back with your knees bent into your chest. Inhale and place your hands behind the back of your head with elbows wide. Exhale as you curl into your upper ab position and extend both legs up to the ceiling



to 90° making sure your tailbone lies securely on the mat. Inhale and slowly lower both legs while maintaining your abdominal scoop. Keep your low back stabilized making sure not to arch or compress your low back. Exhale as you squeeze your inner thighs together and bring your legs back to 90 degrees without lifting your hips or tailbone. As you get stronger, you can increase your range of movement by lowering the legs farther away without ever losing your scoop!

Low back issues are a danger here so pay attention to your abdominal scoop and the range of motion of your legs. Keep focused on your UAC so your head does not drift back away from center.

#### MODIFICATIONS:

**Intermediate:**

- Place hands behind bottom of legs and push legs into hands as you lower.
- Lower legs only a few inches.
- Tight hamstrings/hips – slightly bend knees to keep tailbone anchored.
- Tight low back – place hands under pelvis to lengthen back.

Reps: 5-8. Inhale to lower legs, exhale to lift.

### 5. Elbow to Knee

#### THE ACTION:

Lie on your back with knees bent in toward the chest. Place hands at back of head with elbows wide. Exhale to lengthen up into your UAC. Inhale and twist upper body to right as you extend your left leg to 45 degrees. Exhale and twist to left as legs switch positions. Try to reach your back elbow to the mat as the front elbow reaches to your knee. Your chest moves from side to side without ever losing your upper ab curl. Try not to lower and lift the upper abs. Instead, think of turning the rib cage from side to side.

#### MODIFICATIONS:

**Intermediate:** Keep legs bent into chest or one ankle crossed over the other and only twist upper body.

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**Advanced:** Move slowly one side to the other and extend leg out to height of the eyes.  
Reps: 5-8. Inhale to one side, exhale to other.

*Always remember to keep safety first.* The deeper you can work your abs the better. When you're in your UAC, think of a basket of eggs balanced on top of your head as you move through the five exercises. Keep your body lifted or the basket will fall scattering eggs all over. Support all your movements with your breath and now you are ready to show off your powerful abs!



Beth Downey is the owner of Body Precision Pilates Studio in Rosemont, PA and the director of the nationally recognized Body Precision Teacher Certification Program for traditional Pilates. Beth has been teaching Pilates for over 10 years and specializes in working with clients with back and neck issues. Body Precision is an educational member of the Pilates Method Alliance. You can reach Beth at Beth@phillyfitmagazine.com

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