

6-Pack Abs

***Tools to Help
Sculpt Your Midsection***

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6-PACK ABS: TOOLS TO HELP SCULPT YOUR MIDSECTION

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It's All About the Abs

Washboard, core, belly and muffin top are all terms that we commonly use to describe our abdominals, or abs. Which words do you use? If they're negative or if you struggle to improve this area of your body, don't worry—you're far from alone!

Every year people spend millions of dollars on the latest supplements, devices, exercise classes and personal training sessions with the sole purpose of improving their abs.

I'm sure that if I polled 100 people asking them whether they wanted six-pack abs, almost all would reply "YES" without hesitation. But if I polled those same 100 people asking them how to achieve six-pack abs, I can almost guarantee that half of the responses would contain myths, confusion and rumors. While many people know that they have to eat healthy most of the time to attain an enviable washboard, I believe that most are wasting their time and neglecting crucial muscles during their typical ab-training sessions. Education about exercise and nutrition can be one of your biggest allies in the gym.

In this article we will review basic anatomy, common myths, helpful tips, effective exercises and diet adjustments that will aid you in your quest to achieve a sculpted midline and enviable six-pack abs.



Ab Anatomy

When most of us refer to our abs, we're usually describing the rectus abdominis, the long and flat muscle located between the fifth, sixth and seventh ribs and the top of the pubis. The rectus abdominis contains tendinous sheaths that run horizontally and vertically to create the appearance of a washboard. This muscle helps with flexion, or shortening of the spinal column; is activated when we move side-to-side; and assists with trunk stabilization during various movements.

The next group of muscles (which many use the word "muffin top" to describe) is the external oblique. These muscles run diagonally on each side of the rectus abdominis. They can be found between the lower rib region and pelvis. These muscles help with side-to-side bending, flexion of the spinal column, torso rotation and compression of the abdomen.

The internal oblique muscles are located underneath the external obliques and run into the lower back, or erector spinae. They create right angles with the external obliques; therefore they are often referred to as opposite-side rotators. When you rotate your trunk to the left, the external obliques on your right side will contract and when you rotate to the right, the left external obliques will contract.

The deepest part of the abdominals is the transversus abdominis, which wraps like a corset horizontally around the trunk and from the ribs to the pelvis. Its primary role is to assist with breathing, especially exhalation from the lungs. It also helps with stabilization of the spine.

And the last group of muscles we will discuss here are the hip flexors, which help move the trunk and legs into flexion movements. While they are technically not abdominal muscles, they are involved in a lot of ab or core exercises. To full maximize your ab workouts, you need to learn how to isolate the abs and not let the powerful hip flexors take over the movements.



Common Myths

Let's move beyond our anatomy lesson and begin to uncover some of the most common myths about how to build six-pack abs.

1. I just have to do a million crunches and sit-ups a day"

Crunches are one of the most common ab exercises out there—emphasis on “common.” Common exercises can lead to common results...typically not what we're looking for when it comes to achieving six-pack abs. While crunches can be effective, many people perform them improperly, especially if they pull their head forward during the concentric part of the movement. Crunches shorten the abdominal wall, do nothing for your posture and ultimately provide minimal stimulation for your abs! As for full sit-ups, they utilize the hip flexors far more than the abdominals and can result in back injury, especially for beginners.

2. I should avoid carbs.

Carbohydrates are essential for fueling you throughout a workout. However, fast-digesting carbs such as white bread can trigger an insulin spike, which inhibits your ability to carve out your six-pack abs. Save these types of carbohydrates for post-workout to aid recovery; choose slower-digesting carb sources such as oatmeal and brown rice prior to a workout for best results.

3. I have to be skinny to see my abs.

Sure, lowering your body fat will help uncover your muscles. However, you must HAVE muscle there in the first place!



Helpful Tips

Now that we've discussed some of the most common myths surrounding six-pack abs development, let's get down to business...six-pack abs business. Here are the most helpful tips I give my clients and use myself as I train to achieve better results.

- **Abs are a muscle!**

Some of you might read this and think "duh." But it has to be said. Many of you work on your chest and biceps by hitting a multitude of exercises, increasing your intensity and switching your routine to avoid plateaus. Why would you not treat your abs the same way? Your abs are not magical muscles that require a different approach than your other muscles.

- **Work in different movements!**

The abs can move in several directions, including flexion (shortening) of both the upper and lower abs and flexion of the hips, as well as laterally via flexion of the obliques. They also can rotate! So why are we spending so much time just performing flexion or crunching exercises and neglecting all the other movements? An effective six-pack building program will contain a healthy balance of exercises that work in all these different movement patterns.

- **Abs are made in the kitchen!**

You've heard this statement before. Well, this one is not a myth. Unless you have Superman's genetics, you will have to eat a balanced diet and largely avoid six-pack ab demolishers such as alcohol and processed food. Perfection isn't the goal, but a balanced diet will help you achieve the results much more quickly than an ab-training program in the gym alone.

- ***Avoid foods that cause stomach irritation or sensitivity!***

I know there's a lot of hype about gluten. I agree that it is quite a fad. But I personally experience some gluten sensitivity, which causes my stomach to bloat, hiding the six-pack abs that I need to possess as a fitness competitor. Avoiding foods with gluten is a personal choice I've made to see less bloat and greater definition. Results may vary depending on your dietary needs and body type.

- ***Perform ab exercises earlier and often!***

If you're looking for six-pack abs, why do you wait until the end of your workout to train them? You're probably tired and ready to go home. Areas of focus or concern should not be left to the end of a workout, when you might not have enough energy in the tank to execute an adequate effort. And working your abs more often (with enough rest in between, of course) will lead to better results than only working them once a week.

- ***Breathe!***

During the "squeeze" or concentric phase of the exercise, it is crucial to exhale so you allow enough room in your lungs for oxygen as you progress to the "relax" or eccentric phase. If you are not breathing efficiently, you will not be maximizing your results, and you'll be inviting fatigue and soreness. The muscles require oxygen circulation just as a car needs gas.





Top 8 Six-Pack Abs Exercises

Okay—so now you’re aware of the basic anatomy, common myths or misconceptions, and helpful tips when it comes to developing six-pack abs! Fantastic! But you simply can’t achieve a wash-board set without actually exercising these muscles. So let’s go over the 8 abs exercises I have found to be most effective and “envy-producing.”

- ***Planks***
- ***Spider Plank***
- ***Cable or Resistance Band Rotation***
- ***Swiss Ball Rollout***
- ***Reverse Crunch***
- ***TRX Pike***
- ***TRX Side-Plank***
- ***TRX Pendulum***



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Planks

I believe this is the starting point when it comes to strengthening your abs. The plank helps with overall core stability and strengthens surrounding muscles while still isolating the abdominals. Planks can be modified, progressed and varied depending on any fitness level and should be a weekly staple in everyone's regimen.

- Start with your forearms and toes on the ground. Beginners might need to modify to a knee and forearm position.
- Your elbow should be located directly under your armpit, and your torso and spine should create one continuous line that runs parallel to the floor. If you feel your lower back starting to cave, squeeze your glutes or modify by slightly lifting your hips a few inches.
- **Trainer tip:** Your head should be relaxed—and please don't forget to breathe! Set your gaze slightly in front of your fingertips to keep your spine in a neutral position.
- **Beginner tip:** Start by holding a plank for 20-30 seconds at a time. Rest for 45 seconds and repeat the plank hold for another 20-30 seconds.
- **Advanced tip:** As you progress, increase plank duration by 15 seconds and sets by one to two each week. As you get stronger, avoid plateaus and start progressing the plank by moving to a straight-arm variation.



Spider Plank

This is a progression after you've mastered the basic plank. What I love about the spider plank is that it involves several movements, such as flexion, extension and overall muscular stability and endurance. It gets the job done all in one move! There is more focus on the obliques when compared with the basic plank, which is an added bonus. It will strengthen both the lower and upper abdominals too.

- Start in the plank position with arms fully extended, wrists directly under the armpits. Act as if you are about to descend into a pushup.
- Slowly bring your left knee to your left elbow, in a fashion parallel to the floor.
- Hold the contraction phase of the movement for bonus points and maximal effect as your knee lightly taps your elbow.
- Then slowly return your knee to the starting plank position.
- Continue the exercise by completing the same sequence on your right side.
- **Trainer tip:** Remember the tips I gave you during the plank exercise. Don't let your back cave, and keep your gaze directed slightly in front of your fingertips.
- **Beginner tip:** Start with two to three rounds of 15 repetitions on each side of your body. As you progress, I suggest increasing the rounds and repetitions on a biweekly basis by 10-20 percent.
- **Advanced:** Move slower during the exercise for ultimate results. I've added ankle weights to increase the resistance and effect.



Cable or Resistance Band Rotation

This is a fantastic sports-specific or functional movement that really focuses on the obliques. It will also help to prevent injuries to the lower back and surrounding joints.

- Stand with feet hip-width apart facing a cable machine that is positioned just under shoulder height. If you don't have access to a cable machine, you can set up a resistance band by looping it around a sturdy bar or pole.
- Give yourself room to fully extend your arms. Keeping your arms stationary and flexed, grip the handle with both hands, and slowly rotate to the left.
- Bring the handle back to the starting point and repeat this movement to the right.
- **Trainer tip:** Keep your knees slightly bent, and follow the movement with your gaze.
- **Beginner tip:** Start with two to three rounds of 15 repetitions on each side.
- **Advanced:** Progress the weight of the cable stack as long as you can keep your hips stationary and facing the machine. Increase rounds and reps depending on your aesthetic and fitness needs.



Swiss Ball Rollout

To target the rectus abdominis but keep your back safe, ditch the ab-wheel and try this move.

- Start on your knees with your hands resting together in the shape of an arrow on top of a Swiss ball.
- Slowly roll the ball out, keeping your hands positioned firmly on the ball. Roll out to full extension if possible, without dipping or bowing your back.
- Then slowly roll the ball back to the starting point.
- **Trainer tip:** Keep your core engaged the entire time, and flex your glutes to protect your lower back during this movement. Although it is safer than a traditional ab-wheel exercise, we can never be too careful when it comes to exercises that put possible strain on the lower back.
- **Beginner tip:** Try two to three sets of 12-15 repetitions at first and slowly increase your reps to build core stability and endurance.
- **Advanced tip:** If you have mastered this move, you can come up from your knees onto your toes and change the direction in which you roll out to 45-degree angles.



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Reverse Crunch

As a mom, I love this because of its effectiveness on the lower abdominal area. This move can progress to a parallel or adjustable weight bench.

- Start in a supine position on a yoga mat or a bench, if capable.
- Place both hands near your hips for stability or underneath your glutes to support your low back.
- Start with your legs in a 90-degree angle and slowly lift out of this position, pointing your toes up toward the ceiling. Your hips should lift off of the floor during the contraction phase.
- **Trainer tip:** The slower the better! Contract your abs before lifting off the ground and make the movement slow and controlled.
- **Beginner tip:** Keep your sets and reps in a beginner range as listed previously and slowly increase week by week.
- **Advanced tip:** You can move to a weight bench for progression. A decline bench will allow for greater range of motion and maximum effectiveness.



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TRX Pike

I believe the TRX is one of the best pieces of equipment EVER made to help you achieve six-pack abs. The next three exercises we will focus on involve the TRX. If you don't have access to a TRX, please use a Swiss ball as an alternative.

- Start in a plank or pushup position with your wrists directly underneath your armpits, your back in a straight line parallel to the floor, and your feet placed inside the TRX handles. Make sure the TRX straps are positioned at a length where you are parallel to the floor to ensure safety and effectiveness.
- Engage your core and slowly lift your hips up from the plank position until your body makes an upside down "V."
- Hold this pike position for one to two seconds and slowly lower back into the plank position.
- **Trainer tip:** This is an advanced move; it might require a smaller range of motion and fewer reps as you build strength. As you return from the pike position, make sure that your back doesn't dip or bow.
- **Beginner tip:** Start slow and be smart. A good starting point is two sets of eight to 10 reps. Work up to three to four sets of 15 reps as you practice and build your core strength.
- **Advanced tip:** You can perform an atomic pushup, which includes the TRX Pike and TRX Push-up in combination. For an elite step up, perform while placing your hands on a BOSU ball!



TRX Side Plank

The side-plank is effective by itself. But when you add a TRX to the movement, you will take your six-pack abs game to a whole other level (eight-pack abs)!

- Start on your side with your elbow placed directly underneath your armpit and forearm in line with your head. Everything should be stacked on top of each other to keep you in the safest position.
- Put both feet in the handles. I'd recommend putting one foot in each strap. This will create a staggered stance, but it's the safest point at which to start, especially for beginners.
- To initiate the movement, lift your hip up to create a side-plank position.
- **Trainer tip:** Make sure everything is stacked and contracted to keep you safe. Your hips should not dip, and everything should be aligned except for your feet/strap-position.
- **Beginner tip:** This is a challenging move and takes an incredible amount of core strength to perform. Be patient and practice! Start with one to two sets of 15- to 20-second holds on each side.
- **Advanced tip:** As you improve, you can place both of your feet in single-handle mode and fully extend your arm in the side-plank position. Side-plank TRX crunches or "hip dips" are another progression and one of my favorites to add to this already advanced move.

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TRX Pendulum

For our final exercise, I'll share with you one of my favorites because of its overall "burn factor" and effectiveness on both the obliques and transverse abdominis.

- This move starts out like the TRX Pike. Get into plank position, with your elbows directly under your armpits and your feet in the TRX straps.
- As you lift your hips up from the floor to get into the plank position, contract your core and legs to slowly swing your lower body in a pendulum motion from left to right.
- **Trainer tip:** Your obliques should be initiating the movement. And make sure your back is not dipping at any point during this exercise. Keep the movement slow and controlled, not allowing momentum to do the work for you.
- **Beginner tip:** Keep this pendulum swing slow and small. As you get stronger you will be able to create a broader movement. Start with one to two sets of 12-15 reps each side.
- **Advanced tip:** As you improve, you can get off of your elbows and fully extend your arms. I've added in a knee tuck to this move for extra credit, by doing a full pendulum from left to right and then integrating a double knee tuck to my chest between each rep.

Diet Tips

Now that you have 10 fantastic six-pack ab exercises, you have to tie it all together with a clean diet. Perfection is unattainable, but ultimately I encourage you to achieve a balanced eating plan with “more wins than losses” each day. Here are my top tips to start using today so you can begin to see your hard work pay off.

- **Get rid of processed food.** Sure it tastes good, but it won't help you lose body fat and will slow down your workouts as well.
- **Protein.** My abs are the happiest and most defined when I eat plenty of protein. I personally aim for 1g of protein per pound of body weight. You can definitely consume a smaller amount, but make sure you are getting lean sources during all of your meals.
- **Portion control.** Do you know how many calories you burn a day? Do you know how many calories you are consuming? First off, figure out your TDEE (Total Daily Energy Expenditure) and get yourself a food diary. My Fitness Pal is a fantastic app that many of my clients use with huge success. It will really shine a light on what is going on with your waistline.
- **Alcohol and soda.** Avoid them. Enough said.





In Conclusion...

You now are fully equipped to achieve six-pack abs. With these tools you can achieve dramatic changes to your abdominal region. No more muffin top! Say good bye to that beer belly and hello to your new washboard. All you need now is to "hit play" as we say goodbye!

***Good luck and happy
six-pack abs!***



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