

NUTRITION

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The Best Ways to Get Abs (With or Without a Six-Pack)



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It's no secret that getting a visible six-pack is a common goal for many gym-goers. For better or worse, popular culture often frames a shredded set of abdominal muscles as the epitome of fitness.

In this vein, phrases like “toning up” or “torching belly fat” are often the one-line pitches for the latest workout or diet fad.

While there's nothing inherently wrong with setting aesthetically based fitness goals, training for a strong core and developed six-pack goes beyond appearances. The same can be said for eating a healthy, whole-foods diet.

Having a strong and well-trained core allows you to safely stabilize your spine and torso during functional movements, ultimately contributing to a healthier lower back, reduced risk of injury during activity, and overall improved health and well-being.

When coupled with healthy strategies for reducing body fat, you can reveal your stronger, defined six-pack and have those coveted visible abs.

However, understand that training your six-pack as a component of a strong core and bringing your body fat levels low enough for visible

abdominals are two separate goals — and they should be thought of as such.

This article breaks down everything you need to know about six-pack abs, including what they are, what factors affect abdominal development, how to think about ab-related goals, and a few tips for building a strong, functional core.

Finally, you'll learn a few overall strategies that may help reveal your hard-earned six-pack abs.

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What makes up the six-pack?

The term “six-pack” typically refers to the [rectus abdominis](#) muscle.

This long, relatively narrow muscle runs from your sternum to your pubic bone and is responsible for dynamically flexing your spine forward (1✔).

Studies have shown, though, that this muscle is not necessarily effective as a stabilizer of the spine (2✔, 3✔).

The moniker “six-pack” comes from its appearance of visible rows of 4–8 distinct muscular segments that you can see on individuals with relatively low body fat.

Although many additional important muscles comprise your core, the rectus abdominis is the most superficial one.

As such, it's the muscle that gives chiseled abs their distinct appearance. Likewise, because it's the outermost layer of ab muscle, it does not do much in terms of stability of the spinal column.

SUMMARY

The six-pack comprises the rectus abdominis muscle, which flexes the spine.

What makes the six-pack visible?

The strength and appearance of your six-pack are influenced by a variety of factors.

In terms of having a strong rectus abdominis, regularly training this muscle directly through core exercises can help your six-pack be more effective at moving your spine.

Subcutaneous belly fat

The biggest underlying factor regarding six-pack visibility is how much subcutaneous body fat you store around your stomach.

It's important to know that not having visible six-pack abdominals doesn't mean your core is weak, or even that you are carrying excess weight.

Generally, visible six-pack abs require a body fat percentage much lower than that needed for general health benefits.

One study suggested that a normal range for body fat percentage is 17.6–25.3% in males and 28.8–35.7% in females (4 ✓).

While there's no universal body fat percentage at which six-packs become visible, typical ballpark ranges are 10–12% body fat for men and 16–20% body fat for women.

These numbers are well below those needed for optimal general health and fitness despite the popular association between visible abs and optimal fitness.

Additionally, a recent Harvard Health article stated that excess visceral fat, which is located deeper in your abdomen and surrounds your organs,

is far more dangerous to your health than excess subcutaneous fat, which lies just under your skin and covers your muscles from the outside (5).

Greater levels of visceral fat may not affect the visibility of your six-pack to the same extent as subcutaneous fat, despite the fact that excess visceral fat is a greater health concern.

Genetics

Your genetics also play a big role in where you store **body fat**, which greatly influences the specific body fat percentage at which your abs will be visible. If you tend to store more fat in your hips, your abs will be visible at higher body fat percentages and vice versa.

Lifestyle factors, such as sleep and stress levels, also affect fat gains, which will affect the visibility of your abs.

For example, one study found that regularly sleeping fewer than 7 hours was associated with greater rates of obesity and weight gain (6 ✓).

Suggested reasons for this include sleep deprivation's negative effects on ghrelin, leptin, and insulin, which are key hormones for regulating hunger and fat storage in the body.

Another study found that higher stress levels, as reflected by greater glucocorticoid activity, were also associated with increased rates of obesity (7 ✓).

Beyond the above factors, a surplus calorie intake will typically lead to fat gains over time, which will decrease the visibility of your six-pack — independent of any other factors.

SUMMARY

The visibility of your abdominals depends on your body fat percentage and where you tend to store fat. Lifestyle factors and genetics can affect your overall tendency to store and burn fat.

Should having six-pack abs be my goal in core training?

While it's OK to strive for aesthetic fitness goals like having visible abs, the truth is that your core and abdominals play a much more important role than just being nice to look at.

The rectus abdominis is just one of many muscles in the so-called core, which is a series of muscles that span the hips to the thoracic spine and include superficial and deep layers, as well as different muscles along the front, side, and back of your lower torso.

Collectively, the core muscles stabilize the spine and allow it to bend and twist as required for functional activities.

The biggest [benefits of core training](#) have nothing to do with visible abdominals. Furthermore, the abdominals are just one of many core muscles you should target in your routine.


Additional core muscles that play a vital role include:

- transverse abdominis
- multifidus
- diaphragm
- pelvic floor
- internal and external obliques
- quadratus lumborum

A large body of evidence supports core training for a variety of improved outcomes across different populations.

For example, a recent study found that 4 weeks of core strength training improved performance on sudden perturbation tasks, which correlate to your ability to catch yourself and stand upright when you're about to fall over ([8](#) ✓).

Regarding athletic performance, additional research found that an 8-week core training program improved static balance, core endurance, and running economy in college running athletes ([9](#) ✓).

Finally, one study on core training and low back pain found that all core routines studied improved lower back pain. Yet, routines that targeted the deeper core muscles, such as the transverse abdominis and multifidus, had the greatest positive effects on lower back pain (10 )

It's worth noting that training the core may help build more muscle mass in that region, which will add more contour to your six-pack and potentially allow it to be visible at slightly higher body fat levels.

However, you will still need to have relatively low body fat for this effect to occur, and the main reasons to train the core have more to do with performance and health benefits rather than aesthetic appearances.

SUMMARY

Core training has many scientifically proven benefits. However, visible abs will require low levels of body fat regardless of your training protocol.

Tips for building strong, functional abs (and maybe getting a six-pack in the process)

You know the importance and benefits of core training, you know visible abs require low body fat, and you're ready to start working on your core.

The first step is designing a good, comprehensive routine that you will perform 2–3 times per week.

Comprehensive core training does not have to be complicated, but it should include exercises that occur in all planes of motion, as well as static and movement-based exercises to train both stability and motion in your core muscles.

Without getting too bogged down in [exercise](#) science, the three planes of motion are:

- sagittal plane (forward and backward movements)
- frontal plane (side to side movements)

- transverse plane (twisting or rotational movements)

Static training in each plane involves resisting against a force pushing in the given plane of motion and trying to stay still and prevent the weight from moving you.

The weight could be your own body, such as in a plank, or an external weight, such as resisting the pull of an elastic band.

Movement-based exercises involve moving the resistance through a full range of motion in the given plane. For example, Russian twists, situps, or back extensions.

To design a core routine, pick a static and dynamic exercise in each plane of motion. Perform 3 sets of static holds and then 3 sets of 12 repetitions for the movement exercise. This totals 6 exercises per workout.

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Strategies for revealing your abdominals

It's OK if your goals for core training do not include a visible six-pack. Yet, if they do, the following are a few tips to help you see visible abs. While there's no one-size-fits-all method for revealing abdominals, some principles can help you reduce body fat in the long run.

Get at least 7 hours of sleep

As mentioned, [not sleeping enough is associated with weight gain](#) and obesity. Getting 7–8 hours of sleep each night will be a good foundational step toward long-term fat loss.

Exercise regularly with weights and cardio

Independent of other factors, regular exercise can reduce your body fat. Studies support the use of both aerobic and resistance training for reducing body fat percentage (11 ✓, 12 ✓).

To reap maximum benefits, consider incorporating both forms of exercise into your routine.

Eat a diet high in fresh fruits, vegetables, and lean proteins

Eating a diet high in fresh fruits and vegetables is associated with weight loss and weight maintenance.

For example, a recent meta-analysis found that fruit and vegetable intake in women was directly correlated with losing weight and body fat (13 ✓).

Ensuring adequate protein intake is also important for fat loss and weight maintenance.

In fact, one study found consuming [protein](#) beyond the recommended dietary intake was associated with decreased body fat percentages and maintained amounts of lean muscle mass throughout the duration of the study (14 ✓).

Choose water over sugared drinks

While the evidence is mixed as to whether drinking more water in general aids weight loss, recent research supports the conclusion that replacing sugary drinks with water can aid weight loss, potentially helping you burn fat and reveal your abdominals (15 ✓).

This may be easier said than done depending on your beverage preferences. That said, even replacing one or two drinks a day with water will help support weight loss.

SUMMARY

Getting a visible six-pack requires fat loss, which can be aided by a variety of healthy lifestyle habits.

The bottom line

Visible six-packs abs are a coveted goal for many fitness enthusiasts.

Despite the intense aesthetic focus on this area of the body, your abs and core do far more for you than just give you a fit appearance.

A strong core helps prevent falls, improves athletic performance, and reduces instances of low back pain.

If you do want a visible six-pack, you will need to reduce your body fat levels substantially below a normal range.

Body fat reduction can be achieved through a variety of dietary and lifestyle strategies. However, for most people, maintaining six-pack abs indefinitely can be quite challenging.

Do not beat yourself up if you have trouble getting those stubborn abs to show.

Rest assured that your core can be strong and your body can be healthy regardless of whether your six-pack is visible.

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How we reviewed this article:

HISTORY

Our experts continually monitor the health and wellness space, and we update our articles when new information becomes available.

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