

The Awesome, but Often Elusive Six-Pack Effect



(3 Customer Ratings)

With spring just around the corner and temperatures rising, Americans are feeling the pressure to trim some extra padding off their midsections.

The message hasn't gotten lost on companies. Infomercials showcasing picture-perfect bodies vow that you too can enter the Promised Land of rock-hard bodies and ripped abs. All it takes is a few minutes of your time, their equipment and a good credit card number. Magazine ads touting the "before" and "after" belly effect of popping diet pills also offer quick fixes as long as you're willing to pay for them.

If only it were that easy to get that awesome ripped, six-pack.

So here comes the 'ugly' truth: To sport washboard abs of the likes of Olympic swimmer Dara Torres and rap artist LL Cool Jay you need to be genetically blessed, eat healthy and exercise—a lot.

I know what you're thinking: If "awesome abs" are out of my league, I may as well just curl up on the couch with a bag of chips and continue watching the miracle work of the cynical medical genius "House" or CSI's forensic scientists on television.

Ultimately, this defeatist attitude will only add more pounds to your frame, zap your energy and likely deteriorate your health condition and physical well-being. Studies have shown that physical inactivity and an unhealthy diet are risk factors for chronic illnesses, including diabetes, heart disease and obesity.



The Truth About Better Abs

The good news is that working on a healthier, more physically active lifestyle, doesn't have to be painful. It just takes consistency and a willingness to stick to a plan that's right for you. While not everyone will be able to build the perfect abs, trimming overall body fat can go a long way toward a flatter tummy.

To better understand the myths surrounding your abs, we have asked two veteran fitness experts and ACE-certified professionals, Todd Galati and Fabio Comana, to share their insights in what works and what doesn't work in the quest for a more desirable midriff section.

Why Spot Reduction Doesn't Work

A common fallacy that many people cling to is that by working the ab muscles alone, the fat layers will magically disappear. However, spot reduction never works.

Galati explains: "When we gain weight, we gain weight over the entire body. Everybody has areas on their bodies where we store more or less fat. Hence, when we lose weight, we lose it in similar proportions. The idea that you can target specific areas for weight loss, such as the torso or buttocks, simply doesn't work."

Body Type

Your body type also plays a role.

"Apple-shaped" body types, especially in men, tend to store more fat around the waistline; "pear shaped" body types tend to have heavier hips and thighs. Too much fat in the midsection also increases the risk for serious chronic diseases, such as high blood pressure and diabetes. Reducing fat layers all over your body, but especially in the midsection, can prevent such life-threatening diseases from developing in the first place.

Also, it's no accident that people with great abs have low body fat.

Said Galati, "You need to be in the more athletic range of body fat."

In general, that means 14-20 percent of body-fat for women; 6-13 percent of body fat for men.

The Importance of Genes

Often, however, little body fat isn't enough to make abs stand out. Genetics is also a factor.

"Some people build muscle easier than others," Galati explained.

"A body builder and an endurance athlete may have the same low body fat percentage, but the body builder's ab muscles will be much larger and have greater definition between them than a marathoner who has lean abs, but not necessarily the muscle size."

The Importance of Exercise and Diet

"Both (diet and exercise) are very important (in trying to achieve better-looking abs)," said Comana. Since most Americans tend to have an easier time cutting calories out of their daily diets instead of stepping up their workout routine, here are some simple tricks to cut extra calories:

- Reduce added foods such as mayonnaise, butter, sauces and high-caloric salad dressings
- Instead of skipping deserts altogether, treat yourself to your favorite desert three times a week and only eat half
- Try to cut back on sodas and alcoholic beverages, which tend to be high in calories

- Don't skip meals. This often leads to binge eating
- Eat breakfast every day
- Get enough sleep
- Visit www.mypyramid.gov to learn about healthier eating

Here's another way to look at it.

Since one pound of stored fat contains 3,500 calories, cutting 300-500 calories out of your daily diet for a week—such as two 16-oz cola drinks (at 155 calories per cola that equals 310 calories), a Grande Dulce de Leche Frappuccino Blended Crème (420 calories)—already brings you one step closer to a slimmer waist line.

For most people, a healthy weight loss goal is no more than 1-2 pounds a week.

Still, the most effective and efficient way to trim body fat and gain lean muscle mass, which is the only way to a well-defined physique, is to make physical activity part of your daily routine.

Most adults lose about one-half pound of muscle per year after age 20 due to decreased activity. While aerobic activity, such as biking, running or swimming is important for a healthier heart and to burn calories, strength-training helps build stronger bones and muscle tissue. Lean body mass is also responsible for the number of calories burned at rest (the basal metabolic rate). Gaining more lean muscle will lead to a greater metabolic rate, which makes it easier to maintain a healthy body weight.

Exercise Guidelines

According to the new government recommended exercise guidelines, healthy adults, older adults and adults with disabilities should engage in at least 2.5 hours of weekly moderate-intensity aerobic exercise, such as brisk walking. To gain lean muscle mass, adults should also incorporate strength-training at least twice a week. A well-designed strength-training program will strengthen bones, muscles and connective tissue.

Not only that. Regular physical activity is also key for controlling stress levels.

"Stress increases the circulation of cortisol (also known as the stress hormone)," Comana said. "Cortisol is associated with an increased fat storage in the waist line."

Ab Exercises Everyone Can Do at Home

Four basic ab exercises that most people can perform safely at home and without any equipment are the [plank](#), [side plank](#), [crunches](#), and an exercise for the torso stabilizers and rotators, such as the [bird-dog](#) exercise. Visit ACE's [online exercise library](#) for detailed explanations with visuals.

A recent Consumer Report study, available online at www.consumerreportshealth.org, that evaluated home workout equipment echoes the ACE experts' views that spending a lot of money on fancy equipment isn't any better than simply committing to doing the work.

"Infomercials that claim something that is too good to be true typically is too good to be true," Comana said. "Getting a six pack takes a lot of work, but the infomercials are trying to convince you that if you buy their product you'll get it in minutes a day."

An ACE study, which ranks the most effective ab exercises, will cost you nothing and is [available online](#).

A lot of patience and a commitment to doing the work are guaranteed to bring results.

"We don't put on 20 pounds overnight and we won't lose 20 pounds overnight," Galati said. "Stick with a plan, be consistent and you will see the results. And if you have a setback, don't beat yourself up over it. Just get back into your routine."

Marion Webb is the managing editor for the American Council on Exercise and an ACE-certified Personal Trainer. For specific fitness-related story ideas or comments, please e-mail her directly at marion.webb@acefitness.org.

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Comments: It is amazing how many people think crunches alone can give them great abs. We need to make them realize that it takes a lifestyle change.

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