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Best weighted lower ab exercises

// So you want a full six pack, right? You do crunches, leg raises, russian twists, more crunches, and nothing. So what do you do then? Obvi... you do more crunches, leg raises, and russian twists! This is the inevitable cycle that most men and women tend to get stuck in when they are desperately trying to get a six pack. Try as they might, they just don't seem to develop the deep cuts especially with lower abdominals. At best, they are stuck in 4-pack hell! Banished to live just outside the gates of 6-pack heaven. It's like a middle class suburb just outside the gold plated gates of a private country club neighborhood where all the rich people live. Sure, there 4-pack is nice. It's better than most even. They tell themselves it's fine. They boast about their "6-pack" and since it's better than most - nobody ever calls them out on it. Inside they know the truth. They know they are lying to everyone and worse... they are lying to themselves. They know they aren't good enough to live inside the gates on 6-Pack Ln where I have a sick mansion fully equipped with multiple levels, a 6-car garage, a pool, and a hot tub for... well, let's not get into that here. Another story for another time, maybe after a few glasses of Russian River Zinfandel... This is me stuck in 4-Pack Hell living in a sweet little spot on 4-Pack Ln in middle class suburb just outside the gates of 6-Pack Heaven. As you can see, my lower abs have little to zero development. Did I work my abs? Hell yeah. A ton. Especially in preparation for this shoot. The problem was I didn't know how to properly engage my lower abs and I didn't know about weighted reverse crunches with ankle straps yet. What's worse is that most of these people never get out of 4-pack hell and they never even find out how or why they stayed there despite grueling amounts of crunches. They blame genetics or diet. It's neither. It's you. You are to blame. Nobody else. I used to be you, the guy stuck in 4-pack hell so I can relate. And I want to help. I want you to move the nice neighborhood and join me. I was once living on 4-Pack Ln too so it's possible. You can make the move. You can upgrade. Here's how: This is by far the best exercise you can do to properly develop your lower abs. Isometric and bodyweight exercises are great, but you can do them until you are blue in the face and you still won't develop the deep cuts necessary on the lower abs to really see the full 6-pack visual. The weight is important, but it's more than that. It's also ensuring you properly engage your lower abs. Most exercises people do in the gym for lower abs tend to focus on and work your hip flexors with little to no lower abdominal engagement. This is when I finally made enough to move out of 4-Pack Hell and into 6-Pack Heaven. I still could not afford a sick place, but at least I finally got inside the gates! If you drive a Rolls Royce, you are in the club. Nobody cares which one. You just want to be "in." How did I finally get the lower ab cuts? About 6-months before this shoot I learned the secret of weighted lower ab reverse crunches from a mentor and fitness model legend with a serious set of cover model abs who finally set me straight on my meager and sad 4-Pack. The key on this exercise is to fully roll your hips over and pull your knees to your forehead in order to create a strong contraction on your lower abs. Do this by first pulling your knees into your chest then roll your lower and mid back off the bench until your knees are smacking you in the forehead. Mentally focus on and think about contracting the lower abdominals. Fully exhale as you contract; the more air you exhale the better the contraction and the more work your lower abs will get. Keep knees bent about 90 degrees if possible. When your legs are straight the hip flexors are getting the majority of the work. It's wasted effort, plus keeping your legs from straightening will keep your lower abs engaged. It isn't until your knees pass your hips and move toward your chest as your lower back comes off the bench that your lower abs actually engage. This is an advanced exercise. If you cannot do weighted lower ab reverse crunches then start on the floor doing simple reverse crunches properly with all the cues as listed above. Then move to a decline bench with bodyweight before progressing to the weighted movement using ankle straps. This is when I finally upgraded to my current mansion on 6-Pack Ln... the primo location inside 6-Pack Heaven with the pool, hot tub, and 6-car garage. Even better than the last photo, this is just a selfie meaning I am not dehydrated or carb depleted in this photo. This is after a few years of perfecting my abdominal routine including proper form lower exercises and weighted lower ab exercises. Pretty sick, no? You will need ankle straps for this exercise. I like the Harbinger brand straps. They have small hooks and aren't too heavy duty, but they get the job done. Some of the more hardcore ankle straps with large and heavy hooks can be problematic and dig into your ankle causing bruising and a lot of unnecessary pain. I've seriously jacked up my ankles a few times pushing through the pain and it takes your focus away from your lower abs which isn't good. When working abs especially, you want to ensure a proper mind-muscle connection. If your gym doesn't have them, you can buy them here. And now for the video of me demonstrating the exercise... Here is an easier bodyweight version of this exercise: Chest | Back | Shoulders | Biceps | Triceps | Legs | Abs Let's get one thing straight: This is no late-night infomercial, and we're not going to try to sell you a single "best ab exercise ever." Too many have tried to make that claim, and it's just not the case. The truth is, carving the perfect six-pack requires a variety of exercises and months if not years of consistent work. That doesn't mean you shouldn't try! It just means you need to get moving. We've put together a full slate of top-level choices for building your abs, in no particular order, along with a brief explanation of what makes each one great and—when available—the research to back them up. Here's how we chose them: Ease of learning and performing Total muscle stimulation and intensity Popularity among diehard lifters and bodybuilders (This matters!) Availability of equipment in commercial gyms But definitely don't forget about the kitchen! As registered dietician and bodybuilder Paul Salter explains in, "How Six-Pack Nutrition is a Different Beast than Fitness Nutrition," the more ambitious the goal you set, the less wiggle (i.e., cheat) room you have. Now, let's meet your new favorite ab moves. Why it's on the list: There are many reasons to like leg raises, but top of the list is their scalability. You can start doing bent-knee raises in a captain's chair or with ab straps to focus on the lower core, work up to straight-leg raises, and then move to a hanging bar. By the time you're doing full straight-leg toes-to-bar raises, you've built unparalleled strength in your entire core. Another point in their favor: You can increase the degree of difficulty and resistance by holding a medicine ball between your knees or ankles, allowing you to train in a lower rep range. Or you can add a twist at the top or graduate to full-blown "windshield wipers" to target your deeper rotational muscles and obliques. No matter the variation, just remember to use your abs, not momentum, to get your legs as high as possible on each rep. Hanging Knee Raise Variations for Ab Development: In your workout: Do this move first or second in your routine for 3 sets of 10-15 reps, or however many reps you can do. If using a medicine ball, try a dropset simply by letting go of the medicine ball when you hit failure. Why it's on the list: Ab exercises with added resistance don't get enough love! Extra resistance spurs growth in the fast-twitch muscle fibers like almost nothing else and can really build up the "bricks" of your six-pack. By using a machine, you can also adjust the load and train to failure at just about any rep target you want. A pin-loaded machine works especially well when doing dropsets. If your gym doesn't have a dedicated ab machine, you can still get the same benefits using cables or bands. Machine Crunch Variations for Ab Development: Ab crunch machine Smith machine V-up In your workout: This works great as one of the first exercises in your ab routine. Use a challenging weight for a lower rep target. Of course, it also works with lighter weight as a burnout at the end. In either case, 3-4 sets of 10-15 reps is a solid formula. Why it's on the list: This increasingly popular movement trains your abs to do what they're supposed to do: stabilize your skeleton. The Pallof press is an anti-rotation movement, meaning the body is actively fighting rotation throughout the motion. By utilizing exercises like this, you can increase core stability in various planes of movement and reduce the likelihood of injury. If you've never done these before, expect to be challenged more than you might expect! Pallof Press Variations for Building Strength: Pallof press (cable or band) Pallof press with rotation In your workout: There's no need to go heavy here; all it will do is compromise the quality of the move. Do these after your most difficult ab move of the day using a weight that allows you to manage 3 sets of 10-15 reps on each side. Why it's on the list: The strength of this exercise is its versatility. It works for any fitness level, on any cable machine, and you can add any amount of resistance you need to train at your target rep range. You can also use a resistance band if you don't have a cable stack handy. Despite these advantages, plenty of people still do them wrong! Here are the biggest points to remember, from the article, "4 Cable Crunch Blunders." Squeeze your glutes and keep your hips forward. Sitting back targets more hip flexors. Round your back during each rep. Keep your hands next to your head to avoid making it a shoulder and upper-body move. Keep your neck neutral. Don't tuck your chin. Got it? Now put it into action. Cable Crunch Variations for Ab Development: In your workout: This is another good first or second exercise that can be done for a low-to-moderate number of reps. Do 3 sets of 10-15 reps. If you want to add a dropset, change the pin or use a lighter resistance band when you reach muscle failure and immediately perform another 8-10 reps. Why it's on the list: This old-school fave amps up the ab engagement by increasing the range of motion over standard crunches. You can also dial up—or down—the degree of difficulty by adjusting the angle of the bench. Holding a medicine ball, dumbbell, or plate against your chest adds a further level of customizable resistance. If you want the ab-chiseling upside of cables or gym machines but don't have access to a gym, this is for you. Be warned: Since your feet are hooked, it's all too easy to use your hip flexors to come up instead of your abs. Keep your lower back flat to the bench and your abs engaged. If you're not feeling a wicked burn, drop all the weight, put your hands on your belly, and really focus on the contraction at a slower pace. Decline Crunch Variations for Ab Development: Decline oblique crunch Decline plate sit-up Decline reverse crunch In your workout: Position this one later in your routine after you've built up some fatigue from a really challenging first exercise or two. Do 3 sets of 10-15 reps. If you find 15 reps too easy, simply increase the angle of decline or use a heavier ball or plate. Why it's on the list: No, we're not going to echo that old myth that squats and deads are all you need for abs. You need more! But there's no debating that both front and back squats force you to learn how to brace your abs to maintain a neutral, upright position. And before you say, "It doesn't count if you wear a lifting belt," a number of studies have shown that a belt actually increases ab activation during squats. Oh, and don't worry about balancing on a BOSU ball to increase the work of your stabilizers. Research has shown that if you just go heavy with your squats on the floor, you'll get all the ab stimulus you need. Squat Variations for Ab Development: Barbell front squat Goblet squat Zercher squat Overhead squat In your workout: Regularly program both back and front squats into your routine. To keep it interesting, rotate through in four-week waves, or alternate weeks between back and fronts. Also, if you're following a dedicated program like the 7-Day Six-Pack, do your workouts after your heavy leg days, not before. The last thing you want is to feel sore or weak when you're under the bar! Why it's on the list: To recruit the obliques, you need to do one of three motions: Bend to the side Rotate your trunk Suck in your belly By adding a medicine ball to the twist, you're hitting your obliques with a double whammy by requiring the upper abs to contract isometrically to stabilize against the weight as you move. Try to get a little crunch on either side after the rotation to up the ante. Twist Variations for Ab Development: In your workout: Do this exercise toward the middle of your routine for 3 sets of around 15 reps per side. Increase the degree of difficulty by extending your arms out or using heavier weight. Why it's on the list: This cheap piece of equipment has gained a cult following over the years, and for good reason. EMG data suggests that using an ab wheel is equally if not more effective than hanging leg raises, sit-ups, and reverse crunches at activating the abs. Why is the ab wheel so effective? It capitalizes on the concept of eccentric strength-building perfectly. As you roll out, your trunk must actively fire while those abs stretch to maintain a neutral spine without collapsing under your body weight and gravity. Ab Roll-Out Variations for Ab Development: In your workout: Build up to 3 sets of 8-12 reps, rolling all the way out and back on your knees. If you can't do all the reps prescribed or if your back is arching, reduce the distance and maintain a neutral spine, then slowly work to extend it over a few weeks. Why it's on the list: It turns out the exercise ball is good for more than just sitting and waiting for your partner to finish their set! A research team demonstrated that the pike movement is one of the most effective total-ab activators out there. It topped the EMG list for upper abs, lower abs, and obliques. The version in the study was performed on a ball, but pikes can also be done on a suspension strap system. Exercise Ball Pike Variations for Ab Development: In your workout: Since it targets a large degree of the muscle mass of the abdomen, the pike can either be used to get your routine started or as a really brutal way to finish it out. Shoot for 2-3 sets of 8-12 reps. If you can't complete reps with good form, start with exercise ball knee roll-ins. Why it's on the list: Muscle activation studies consider the plank a mid-level exercise. But in this case, that doesn't tell the whole story. It's first and foremost a great transverse abdominis move, but that muscle is deep, so can't be measured by EMG. Planks primarily made the list because of how easily you can use different variations to change the level of difficulty. If an elbow plank is too difficult, perform it with the arms straight or simply drop to your knees. Too easy? Lift an arm or a leg—or an arm and a leg. Put your feet into suspension straps or on a stability ball. Each one of these progressions leads to a greater training stimulus to the abs. Plank Variations for Strength and Growth: In your workout: You can do these last on ab day, but you can also do them at home just about any time you want. Since it's an isometric move, shoot for time rather than reps. Doing 3-5 sets of 30-90 seconds in whatever variation is toughest for you should get you shaking! Hard and Heavy Ab Workout All-in-One Six-Pack Workout Machine Ab Workout If you're ready to build your ab muscles so they're visible even at a slightly higher body fat level, this is the workout. With hanging leg raises and a weighted superset, you'll be feeling your core right out of the gate. Finishing with a round of kneeling cable crunches, you'll leave the gym afraid to cough or laugh. Hard and Heavy Ab Workout 3 sets, 15 reps (rest 90 sec.) Perform the exercises in order, resting as little as possible between exercises and 1 min. between sets. 4 sets, 10 reps (no rest) 4 sets, 12 reps (rest 1 min.) 3 sets, 15 reps (rest 90 sec.) Chasing a six-pack? This ab workout is a perfect way to start your day or the perfect end to any workout. With bodyweight exercises and circuit-style intervals, you'll hit every angle of your abs and work up a sweat in less than 20 minutes! All-in-One Six-Pack Workout Ab Rollout Perform on your knees and limit your range of motion to what you can do without letting your lower back droop. If you reach failure, hold a static position with your arms below your shoulders for the remainder of the 30 sec. 3 sets, 30 sec (rest 1 min.) 3 sets, 30 sec (rest 1 min.) Perform for time on one side before switching to the other side. Rest as little as possible between sides and 1 min. between sets. 3 sets, 30 sec (right side, no rest) 3 sets, 30 sec (left side, rest 1 min.) This three-move cable ab workout is simple, but brutal. Each of the exercises are performed for 3 sets of 10-12 reps. So, what's the catch? You'll perform a dropset at the end of each movement. Take each set to failure and expect to have nothing left in the tank! Kneeling cable crunch After the final set, perform a single dropset. STANDING CABLE HIGH-TO-LOW TWIST Perform for all reps on one side before switching to the other side. Rest as little as possible between sides. Cable Cross-Body Pull After the final set, perform a single dropset. 3 sets, 10-12 reps (left side, no rest) Cable Cross-Body Pull After the final set, perform a single dropset. 3 sets, 10-12 reps (right side, rest 1 min.) Cable reverse crunch After the final set, perform a single dropset. 3 sets, 10-12 reps (rest 1 min.) What Are the Best Ab Programs for Building Your Six-Pack? The best ab-building programs feature ab-focused workouts that'll leave your core sore, but also help create results you can see in the mirror. Heavy and high volume is the name of the game! Get your diet right and get to work. To follow a similar blueprint to build the rest of your body, check out the companion pieces in this series:

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