



[Pilates Q & A: Why can't I do a Pilates rollup?](#)

Many people struggle to do a rollup. No matter how hard they try, they can't get all the way up.

Fiona, one of my clients, complains: "I only get up so far and then I have to use my hands to pull myself up." Another client only succeeds if she uses momentum (that little lurch). Then there's Steve, who manages to roll up but finds that his legs come off the floor too.

In frustration, Sandra confesses, "It doesn't seem to matter how strong my abs are, I just can't seem to get up all the way!"

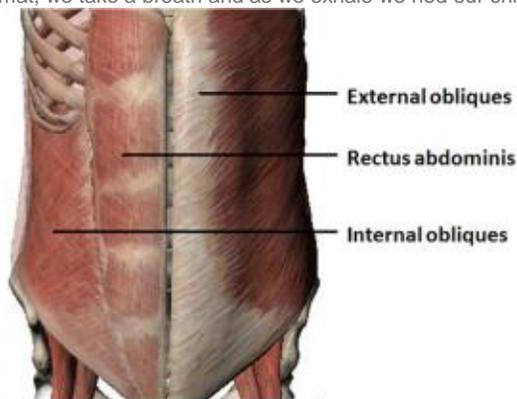
Like Sandra, many people think the problem is their abs. But there's a lot more to a roll up than abs. So maybe addressing other areas will help. Read on to find out!

Three key muscle groups help with roll ups

There's definitely more than meets the eye when we try to roll up. Certainly, we need our abs. But they're only part of the story. There are at least two other groups of muscles that come into play: hip flexors and back of thigh and bum muscles.

Starting with an ab curl

Typically, we start a roll up with an ab curl. Lying on the mat, we take a breath and as we exhale we nod our chin and start to curl up over our front ribs



Abdominal muscles

into an ab curl, resting on the base of our back ribs.

To curl up like this we need our abs to pull our upper torso away from the mat (against gravity). Which abs, you may ask? Rectus abdominis, the 6 pack muscles in the front of our torso. We also use the obliques, our side torso muscles, especially our external obliques.

So for the first part of the rollup we do use our abs, specifically, the rectus abdominis and obliques.

Getting the ribs off the floor...

Now we're at the stage where we have to get our ribs and torso up off the floor. That's where the challenge starts for a lot of people! And that's also where we need some extra help for those ab muscles.

Not only are we flexing our spine to come into an ab curl, and continuing to flex it to come up further, but our legs are out in front of us. To come up further, we also have to flex, or bend, at the hips! Enter the hip flexors.



Psoas

Adding the hip flexors

We have superficial hip flexors and we have deep hip flexors. Both help us in a rollup.

The deep hip flexor is called the psoas. It looks like a big flank steak that runs from the mid back across the pelvis to the top inside bump of our thigh bone. Because of the way it attaches it helps us pull the spine toward the legs when we roll up.

The other more superficial hip flexors help us do the same thing. Those are the muscles you can feel at the front crease where your pelvis attaches to your thigh.

So far we have the rectus abdominis and obliques from the ab group helping us get to an ab curl (up to the base of the ribs). Then we add the hip flexors to help get the torso off the ground.

Staying grounded

What about those who can get up about two thirds of the way but can't keep their legs down on the ground?

After the abs and hip flexors, we have to add the muscles at the back of our legs, primarily our hamstrings, to help us get up the rest of the way in our rollup.

Our hamstrings help us glue the back of the thighs to the floor so we can get the rest of the way up to sit tall. They help us lever our bodies up. For many the hamstring contraction causes the knees to bend, which triggers an offsetting contraction of the quadriceps at the front of the thigh to keep the leg straight.

So the abs help with the initial curl off the floor. The hip flexors help lift the torso. And the hamstrings help us keep our legs down as we come up the rest of the way to sit tall.

Finding the right rhythm

They say timing is everything. The same goes for a rollup. All the bones and muscles have to work in a coordinated rhythm to make it all the way up. We know the rhythm is working well when we can articulate the spine—roll up or down bone by bone, with no gaps.

Our deep core muscles help us articulate the spine so working the core helps us articulate the spine better. When we articulate the spine better we improve the timing or bone rhythms in our body. That is the last ingredient in our rollup.

By [Jane Aronovitch](#)|September 24th, 2013