

# Strength Training That Works

By Akanke Birmingham

If you ask any fitness trainer, strength training is the answer to a lot of our workout goals. Want to get stronger? Want bigger muscles? Want firmer muscles or more definition? The answer always involves strength training. It's not just for athletes anymore. Strength training is for everyone—young and old, male and female. But what exactly is it? Strength training refers to exercises done with resistance in an attempt to improve individual strength. Resistance comes in many forms including exercise bands, dumbbells, machines and medicine balls.

Our muscles don't get stronger just because we want them to. Our bodies are reactive, so in order to make a muscle stronger, we must give our bodies a reason to do so. When you challenge a muscle with resistance, your body realizes a need to adapt. In order to handle the increased workload, the body "goes under construction" and rebuilds the damaged muscle. This process takes about 48 hours. The newly constructed muscle is slightly bigger and stronger than before. It is through this reoccurring gradual process that we become stronger and more muscular.

Strength training not only makes you look good on the outside, it does wonders for your insides, too. It reduces the painful symptoms of arthritis and depression, helps prevent osteoporosis by making bones stronger, reduces back pain by improving posture and helps prevent obesity by making it harder to gain fat. Increased muscular strength also makes your tendons and ligaments stronger. Older

adults can reap the benefits, too. They will function more independently as their bodies gain mobility. Establishing a sound strength training routine at any point in life has proven to be instrumental in improving health and well-being.

## Before You Get Started

The act of lifting weights is stressful on your body, so you must make sure you are healthy enough to begin. One way to do this is by using the Physical Activity Readiness Questionnaire, or PAR-Q (see website). This questionnaire is designed for people ages 15-69. If you fall outside of this age range, please get your doctor's approval before beginning a regular exercise program, as teens have bones, tendons and ligaments that are still growing, while older adults have bones that may be weakened due to inactivity. The PAR-Q is a series of seven questions used to determine whether or not you can engage in physical activity and what modifications you may need if you do. If you answer yes to any questions on the PAR-Q, you should talk to your doctor. Answering yes to any of the questions does not mean you cannot participate; it may simply mean you need to start slowly or modify certain exercises.

## Putting it All Together

There are a number of ways to group your exercises. I generally start beginners out with at least one exercise per body part. This gives them



Reggie Stroman of *Elite Physique Transformations*.

a good foundation of strength and gets the body out of "couch potato" mode. In general, you should work larger muscle groups first during the workout.

If you're a beginner, teen or older adult, start with a full body workout two to three times per week, similar to the one below. If you are doing it twice per week, take at least two days off between lifting days (for example, train on Monday and Thursday). If you are going for three days, every other day is fine. Your fitness level will determine your frequency.

If you are a routine exerciser, two to three muscle groups per workout is good, hitting each muscle group one or two times per week, depending on your goals. With the following workouts, you can perform day one on Monday, day two on Tuesday, and day three on Wednesday since different muscle groups are trained each day.

When exercising, please keep in mind that if you ever feel pain in a joint, stop that exercise and have it checked out. When lifting, do not use fast, jerky movements. Use a slow, controlled motion to avoid injury and yield optimal results. If



Perform strength training moves using proper form from beginning to end.

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Use a spotter, they monitor you while you are lifting the weight to ensure proper form and technique.

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you are unsure of any of the exercises listed, any trainer at your local gym should be able to show you.

### The Key to Making it Work.

A common reason that many people exercise and stop seeing results is because they do the same thing over and over for months or even years. You need to change your workouts as you change. Remember, your body is reactive; so once it can handle your workload, it will not get bigger and stronger without a reason. That said, you must gradually increase the weight you are using as you progress. Your starting weight should be 70-80% of your one rep max. One rep max stands for “one repetition maximum” and refers to the amount of weight you can lift one time. With the help of a personal trainer or spotter, you can determine your one rep max. If you learn that your one rep max is 200 pounds, then your starting weight would be 70% of that, or 140 pounds. You would perform eight to 12 reps of 140 pounds, and as it gets easier, you would increase your repetitions and eventually your weight.

The body also has the ability to adapt to the types of stress that you apply over time, so in addition to advancing your weight, you should vary your exercises as well to avoid hitting a plateau. In general, you should change your workout every four to six weeks.

Consistency is not to be ignored. If you perform a workout for two weeks, then stop, eventually your body will realize that it no longer needs as much muscle and it will break it down. This is why if you stop lifting weights for a while, everything feels heavier once you start again. If you don't use the muscle, you will lose it.

### Machines vs. Free Weights.

The type of resistance to use is often debated. There are advantages and disadvantages for both, and there is no right answer. Machines are easier to use and take less time than free weights, as you don't have to worry about changing large steel plates. If you're a beginner, in a hurry or uncomfortable with the free weights, you may want to use machines. However, machines are built for the average individual. So if you are very short or very tall, you may find them difficult to use. Free weights are more effective in building stabilizer muscles and allow for greater overall strength and more natural range of motion. Bodybuilders and athletes usually migrate toward free weights. The type of resistance you choose will be determined by your goals.

### Respect the Fact that the Body Works as a Whole.

If you desire increased strength in one muscle, you must also strengthen all the muscles that support it. For example, many men go all out working chest and triceps, but their lifts won't improve if they neglect the shoulder. The front, side and rear of each shoulder must be strong to properly stabilize the arms during the bench press. You'll get stronger and look better, too.

### Don't Work the Same Muscle Two Days in a Row.

Contrary to popular belief, you are not building muscle when you're working it; you're actually breaking it down. It is rebuilt during your rest periods. If you work a muscle too often, it will not have a chance to recover and get stronger. More isn't necessarily better, so don't overdo it.

### Use a Spotter.

A spotter is a person who monitors you while you perform a lift. In the event your muscles fatigue and cannot lift the weight, your spotter will help you complete the lift. Spotters are good for beginners and athletes alike. Beginners utilize them as a partner to ensure proper form and control as they adjust to the exercise, while athletes take advantage of the added security when performing heavy lifts.

Fortunately, the human body doesn't work like the average machine. When we use our bodies the right way, they actually improve instead of breaking down. We can use this knowledge to make our bodies healthier, more powerful and attractive. The formula to building muscle is simple: Lift weights. Allow the muscle to recover. Repeat. Your body is an incredible machine, and you will be amazed to see your progress over time. **BH**

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