

Starting a Strength Training Program

Exercise programs that get the best results are made up of three main elements: aerobic conditioning, flexibility exercises, and strength training.

In strength training, resistance is added to movement in order to make muscles work harder and, over time, become stronger. The most common strength training methods include using weight machines, working with free weights, or doing exercises that use your own body weight (push-ups, for example).

The Benefits of Strength Training

Strength training increases muscle tone, strength, and endurance, as well as bone strength. Being stronger improves your balance and coordination, reduces your risk for injury, and also makes it easier to do daily activities like carrying groceries and doing yard work.

As we age, we naturally begin to lose muscle mass, which slows down metabolism. Having more muscle mass helps your body burn more calories when at rest. Increasing your muscle mass with strength training is an important element of a weight management program.

Strength Training Equipment

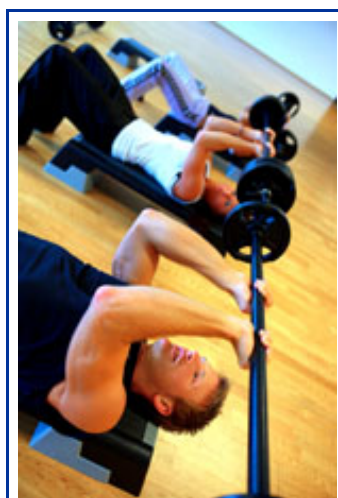
Strength training is typically done with free weights and weight machines. Both are effective ways to improve muscle strength and endurance.

Free weights are less expensive than weight machines and are more easily adapted to different body types. Free weight programs often include using dumbbells, a bar bell, and a weight bench.

Weight machines are generally safer than most free weights because your body positioning and the weight you are lifting are more controlled. There are different types of multipurpose weight machines, but many machines focus on strengthening just one specific muscle group.

Strength training programs can also be enhanced with other tools, such as resistance tubing, stability balls, as well as exercises that use your own body weight for resistance.

Different types of equipment make your muscles work differently, so following a program that uses a variety of strength equipment may provide better results, as well as help you stay motivated to exercise.



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Exercise Safety

If you have a chronic health condition, are overweight, a smoker, or are middle aged or older and have never exercised, check with your doctor before starting any exercise program.

Strengthening exercises provide many health benefits, but when you do them incorrectly, you are at risk for injury. If you are a member of a health club, ask a fitness professional to show you how to safely use the weight machines and free weights. For many people, a group fitness class is also a good option for learning strength exercises and performing them correctly.

Some people prefer exercising at home. If you plan on this, it is a good idea to schedule a few sessions with a certified personal trainer to make sure you know how to do the exercises correctly. An exercise professional can also help you design a strengthening program that will meet your needs. Home exercise videos are another way to combat exercise boredom and maintain proper form and technique.

An Effective Strength Program

A general guideline for improving strength is to exercise each major muscle group at least twice a week. For example, you could focus on total body strength training two days out of the week, or you could break it up by doing your lower body and upper body on alternate days.

Be sure to rest the muscle group you have worked (shoulders, for example) for a full day in between strength sessions for that muscle group. So, if you prefer total body strength training, the day after your strength train day should be either a rest or aerobic conditioning day.

Your program should include exercises for all of the major muscle groups. Muscle imbalances are a major cause of injury.

Three sets of 12 repetitions has long been the standard for effective strength training, and is still a helpful guideline. But if finding time to exercise is a challenge, you may be able to improve your strength with fewer repetitions. Recent research shows that most people see results from one set of 12 to 15 repetitions, as long as they are pushing their muscles to fatigue.

Regardless of the number of sets, be sure to choose a weight that is heavy enough to fatigue your muscles in 12 to 15 repetitions. As the exercise becomes easier, gradually increase the level of resistance.

As you become stronger, it may become more difficult to measure the strength gains you make. Try adding new exercises or equipment to your regimen to keep your strength workouts fresh, engaging, and effective.

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