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GOING STRONG

Boost your health with strength training

By Heather R. Johnson



If you're over 30, strength training should rank as high on your healthy to-do list as eating your vegetables and brushing your teeth.

Women lose 5 percent of their lean muscle mass—key for keeping metabolism revved, weight stable and mobility intact—every decade, starting in their 30s. “Strength training helps you avoid later-in-life accidents, such as the falls that cause hip fractures,” says Pam Sherman, a personal trainer based in Sacramento, Calif. “There’s no way you won’t lose muscle unless you put strength training into your program now.”

And strength training doesn’t just preserve muscle. It also helps you maintain bone density as you age.

“As you get older, estrogen decreases, which leads to a decrease in bone mass,” says Chicago-based personal trainer and running coach Meghan Kennihan. “By strength training with weight resistance, you not only build or maintain bone density, but also the muscles and connective tissue. So even if you fall, you will be agile enough to break your fall.”

Getting started

You don't have to join a gym to build up your strength. There are dozens of exercises you can do at home or at a park using free weights or your own body weight to provide resistance.

Be sure to get your physician's OK before starting any new exercise regimen, of course, and follow some basic tips for good form: Exhale as you lift or push, inhale as you relax, and move smoothly and in a controlled way without "locking" your joints.

If you're new to weightlifting, the American Council on Exercise suggests starting with a weight you can lift 12 to 15 times for one to two sets. "If you can do 20 repetitions of any exercise, it's time to up the resistance," Sherman says.

Begin with bodyweight exercises and progress to using inexpensive resistance bands and free weights. Your last two to three repetitions should feel challenging.

"If you can do 20 repetitions of any exercise, it's time to up the resistance."

Pam Sherman, personal trainer in Sacramento, Calif.

Strength-building essentials

You should aim to incorporate strength into your workout routine two to three times a week. If you're pressed for time, break up your routine into two 10-minute sessions.

"Do two exercises in the morning and two after work," says Kennihan. "The important thing is to get the metabolism up and stress those muscles and bones."

And always make sure you've mastered the proper form of an exercise before performing it with free weights. Then, gradually increase the weight you lift, according to your goals and comfort level.

Gym time

Hit the gym to take your progress to the next level. You can do the same exercises using heavier weights or while standing on a BOSU ball for an extra challenge. Weight machines can also help you target different muscle groups—and don't be afraid to ask for help if you aren't sure how to use a piece of equipment.

"Most gyms offer a free consultation with a trainer," Kennihan says. "They'll look at your form, get you set up on the machines and show you how to use them correctly."

Don't be intimidated if you haven't lifted weights or used weight machines before. Because you don't have the testosterone levels of a man, strength training isn't going to bulk you up. You will, however, build or maintain muscle mass and bone density, boost your metabolism, lower your blood pressure and possibly lose a few inches.

"The confidence you get from being strong is a huge bonus," Kennihan says.

6 TOP STRENGTH MOVES



With these six simple moves, performed at home or at the gym, you can check strength training off your list in about 30 minutes, according to Chicago-based personal trainer and running coach Meghan Kennihan.

Start with two sets of 10 repetitions each (one rep for planks). When that starts to feel easier, progress to three sets of 10. After that, do three sets of 12 to 15.

- 1 | Pushups** to improve posture and strengthen chest and arm muscles. Use the kitchen counter if needed and progress to a bench, to knee pushups and then to traditional pushups.
- 2 | Step-ups** to build strong calves, legs and glutes.
- 3 | Triceps dips** to develop upper-body strength.
- 4 | Planks** to work your core. Hold for 15 seconds and build up to 1 minute.
- 5 | Squats** to target the legs, hips and glutes. Keep your weight in your heels as you push up.
- 6 | Walking lunges** to strengthen the lower body. Mix it up by lunging forward, backward or side-to-side.

STRENGTH TRAINING FOR BEGINNERS

If you haven't done strength training before, California personal trainer Pam Sherman recommends a simple 5-minute kitchen workout. First, march in place or walk briskly to warm up. After that, perform these exercises:

- 10 pushups against the counter
- 10 squats in front of a chair, barely tapping your butt on the seat
- 10 triceps dips, hands on the edge of the chair
- 20 jumping jacks



Move quickly between exercises and repeat the circuit for 5 minutes. To make the workout more challenging, add more sets and/or incorporate other exercises, such as walking lunges or planks.