



Choosing Free Weights

You may be thinking about purchasing free-weight equipment for your at-home strength training program. Before you scurry off to a specialty equipment store, determine your spending range and the space you have available for a bench and accessories. What else should you think about when shopping for free-weight equipment?

Don't Skimp on the Bench

Many new exercisers are tempted to buy a less expensive bench so they can spend more money on "extras." Don't do it! The weight bench is the foundation on which your home gym is built. When choosing a bench, look for safety, comfort and adjustability.

Safety and **sturdiness** go hand in hand. Choose a weight bench with a steel base of 14 gauge or better, and two-by-two tubing for the feet and legs. The lower the gauge number, the thicker the steel. Cheaper benches found in many sporting goods stores are constructed of 16- to 17-gauge steel and have smaller tubing for the feet and legs. The stronger benches will support heavier body weight and heavier barbell and dumbbell weights. Try the bench out. Lie down on it and make sure it feels firm and unmovable beneath you.

The **comfort** of the bench pad is also important. Pad density and the supporting board thickness determine the comfort and safety of the bench when bearing weight. The better benches have boards that are approximately $\frac{3}{4}$ inch thick and pads that are $\frac{3}{4}$ inch or thicker. Thinner boards will be more likely to collapse under heavy loads, and thinner pads will be less comfortable.

Do a bench press or dumbbell press to test the bench for comfort and safety. Also check the quality of the vinyl that

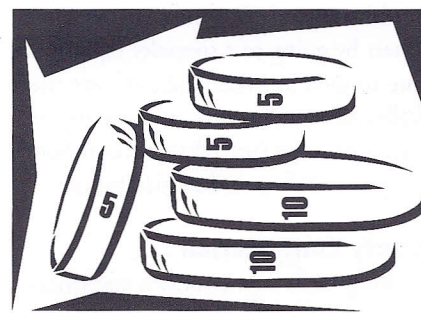
covers the bench pad. Is it sturdy enough to stand the test of time and use?

Some benches are very basic—simply stand-alone, flat pieces of equipment. Other benches have advanced design features, such as uprights to hold barbells for bench presses or squats, several **adjustments** that allow various angles for inclines, and a fitting on the end of the bench to accommodate a variety of attachments for exercises like leg extensions and pull-downs. If the bench you are considering has a leg attachment, test it to make sure it fits your lower-leg length when you are doing leg extensions and curls. Many of the inexpensive benches place your legs at uncomfortable and unsafe angles.

My advice is to purchase a top-of-the-line bench that has a 48-inch spread on the uprights (to accommodate a seven-foot bar, which the narrow uprights cannot); various angle adjustments for inclines; and the leg extension/curl attachment. These benches are more expensive (\$350 and up) but provide unlimited possibilities for strength training exercises.

Dumbbells and Barbells

Nothing adds more versatility to a free-weight program than a wide range of dumbbell weights, a bar or two, and ankle weights. When choosing dumbbells, you have a choice between steel and chrome. The steel ones cost about \$.50 per pound; the chrome, about \$2 per pound. Although the chrome dumbbells are a lot flashier and will look better longer, steel will also do the job. Free-weight bars come in two lengths: a seven-foot bar for squats and bench presses, and a four-foot straight or curl bar for biceps and triceps exercises. (Some exercisers prefer the shorter bar for bench presses and squats, too.) You



also need to purchase weight plates and "collars" to hold the plates in place on the bar. Be sure to choose plates (and bars) with the same diameter as the leg attachment on your weight bench so the weights will be interchangeable.

Ankle weights are good for shaping the legs. Purchase ankle weights that are 10 pounds each and can be altered in $\frac{1}{2}$ - to one-pound increments. You can start with light weights and progress to heavier ones as your strength increases.

Quality free-weight equipment is an investment in your health and longevity. Spend the time necessary to choose equipment that will last. ●

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