

Strength Training for Women

A decade ago most women did not strength train. Today, however, many women have discovered its benefits. Here Patty S. Freedson, PhD, graduate program director in the Exercise Science Department at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, answers commonly asked questions women have about resistance training.

1 How Can Strength Training Help Me? In the Baltimore Longitudinal Study of Aging, researchers found that women's strength begins to decline at age 40 and decreases 8 to 10 percent per decade after that. Fortunately, strength training can help stop this decline. Benefits of resistance training for women of all ages include improved strength and power, increased bone strength, increased lean body mass, decreased resting blood pressure and lower risk for type 2 diabetes.

2 As an Older Woman, Is It Safe for Me to Train? Absolutely! In fact, older women *must* participate in strength training activities if they want to maintain maximum health. Health benefits include reduced risk for osteoporosis, decreased risk of falls and sustained independence later in life.

3 How Will Strength Training Impact Muscle Size? Strength training will result in a small increase in muscle size, but you don't need to worry about getting huge bodybuilder muscles. For these, you would need more than the low levels of testosterone that women typically have.

4 Can I Gain Strength Like a Man? While your muscles will not become as large as men's, several studies have confirmed that women's strength gains are similar to those of men.

5 Should I Use Machines or Free Weights? Both machines and free weights have their strengths and weaknesses. Weight machines are safe, easy to use, work all major muscle groups and require minimal skill. However, they are expensive (or require that you belong to a gym), offer a limited number of exercises and restrict movements. Free weights allow you to perform a variety of exercises, mimic true movements, are less expensive and can help you develop skilled movements. On the other hand, they can be less safe, require more skill and may require a partner to help you train. You can choose free weights, machines or a combination. Consult a personal trainer for help deciding which to use.

6 Do I Need to Join a Gym to Strength Train? No. You can use inexpensive strength training devices such as dumbbells, ankle weights, elastic bands, barbells and weight benches at home.

7 What Principles Should I Follow? Use low repetitions and high resistance for increasing absolute strength and power and high repetitions and low resistance for muscle toning and muscle endurance. The American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) recommends you do eight to 12 reps per set to improve muscle tone and endurance and six to eight reps per set to maximize gains in strength and power.

8 Are There Any Other General Recommendations? ACSM advises you to strength train two to three days per week. Perform at least one set of eight to 12 reps (if you're under 50) and 10 to 15 reps (if you are 50 or older) at a weight that fatigues your muscles.

9 What Exercises Should I Do as a Beginner? Select exercises that work every major muscle group. Start with bench press, lat pull-down, lateral raise, triceps extension, biceps curl, leg press, calf raise and abdominal curl. Begin with one set of each exercise for your first three to six workouts and build up to three sets per exercise. You may add or substitute other lower- and upper-body exercises after you train for a few weeks.

10 How Can I Achieve Maximum Success? Follow the overload principle, which means you overload the muscles with more stress than usual to obtain an optimal response. Variations in overload are accomplished by manipulating how much weight you are lifting, the number of repetitions, number of sets of repetitions, rest intervals between sets and workout frequency. Consult a personal trainer for help.

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