

Weight training: Do's and don'ts of proper technique

Effective weight training depends on proper technique. Follow these do's and don'ts to maximize your weight training program.

By Mayo Clinic staff

You don't have to be a bodybuilder or professional athlete to reap the benefits of weight training. When done correctly, weight training can help you lose fat, increase your strength and muscle tone, and improve your bone density. If done incorrectly, however, weight training won't give you these benefits — and may even lead to injury.

Check your technique

You might learn weight training techniques by watching friends or others in the gym — but sometimes what you see isn't safe. Incorrect weight training technique can lead to sprains, strains, fractures and other painful injuries that may hamper your weight training efforts.

If you're just getting started, work with a knowledgeable weight training specialist — a physical therapist, athletic trainer or other fitness specialist who's familiar with proper weight training technique. If you've been using weights for a while, consider scheduling time with a trainer to demonstrate your technique and identify any changes you may need to make.

Weight training do's

When you're weight training, do:

- **Lift an appropriate amount of weight.** Start with a weight you can lift comfortably 12 to 15 times. For most people, a single set of 12 repetitions with the proper weight can build strength just as efficiently as can three sets of the same exercise. As you get stronger, gradually increase the amount of weight.
- **Use proper form.** Learn to do each exercise correctly. The better your form, the better your results — and the less likely you are to hurt yourself. If you're unable to maintain good form, decrease the weight or the number of repetitions. Remember that proper form matters even when you pick up and replace your weights on the weight racks. If you're not sure whether you're doing a particular exercise correctly, ask a personal trainer or other fitness specialist for help.
- **Breathe.** You might be tempted to hold your breath while you're lifting weights. Don't. Holding your breath can lead to dangerous increases in blood pressure. Instead, breathe out as you lift the weight and breathe in as you lower the weight.

- **Seek balance.** Work all of your major muscles — abdominals, legs, chest, back, shoulders and arms. Strengthen the opposing muscles in a balanced way, such as the front of the shoulder and the back of the shoulder.
- **Rest.** Avoid exercising the same muscles two days in a row. You might work all of your major muscle groups at a single session two or three times a week, or plan daily sessions for specific muscle groups. For example, on Monday work your arms and shoulders, on Tuesday work your legs, and so on.

Weight training don'ts

Follow these tips to avoid common mistakes when you're weight training:

- **Don't skip the warm-up.** Cold muscles are more prone to injury than are warm muscles. Before you lift weights, warm up with five to 10 minutes of brisk walking or other aerobic activity.
- **Don't rush.** Move the weight in an unhurried, controlled fashion. Taking it slow helps you isolate the muscles you want to work and keeps you from relying on momentum to lift the weight.
- **Don't overdo.** For most people, completing one set of exercises to the point of fatigue is typically enough. Additional sets may only eat up your time and contribute to overload injury.
- **Don't ignore pain.** If an exercise causes pain, stop. Try it again in a few days or try it with less weight.
- **Don't forget your shoes.** Shoes with good traction can keep you from slipping while you're lifting weights.

Remember, the more you concentrate on proper weight training technique, the more you'll get from your weight training program.