

How Much Weight Should I Lift?

By Karen McCoy

Question: I'm new to strength training. How much weight should I be lifting to get the most benefit in my training?

That's a great question, as I find that the majority of people are not lifting enough weight. In fact, University researchers in the Midwest studied 30 men and women, asking them to choose their weights for five different exercises. The majority of the participants chose weights that were too low (42% - 57% of their One-Rep Max) to result in any physical gains.

This is particularly true of women, as they are often afraid to use as much weight as needed to obtain benefits because they're concerned about building large muscles. You need to understand that a regular strength training workout will not bulk you up, and this is mostly true for women because their body does not produce enough hormones that allow bulking up. Strength training requires the weights used to be heavy enough for the muscle to be challenged. Weights that are too light will not put enough stress on the muscles and therefore will not change their appearance.

Using too-light weight is particularly evident with people who train at home, as they have no trainer to teach them (or push them). Most people will buy 3 or 5 pound dumbbells, and they wonder why they aren't making any real gains in their exercise regime.

One Rep Max: This is the gold standard for determining what weight you should be lifting. The One Rep Max (1 RM) is the highest possible weight you could lift on a particular exercise if you only did one repetition. When strength training, you should be lifting a weight that is about 60-70% of this 1 RM. This can go up to 80-90% if you're into serious bodybuilding competition-style lifting, but for now we'll keep it at 70%.



It's extremely important to warm up if you're using this technique, as you can injure yourself using this method. Let's take the bicep curl for an example – grab a moderate weight and perform the curl. If you're able to do it easily, increase the weight by 50%. Try again. If you can eke out another 5 reps, increase by 30% or so. Lift again...if you're only able to do one solid curl at 20 pounds, that's your 1 RM. Determine 70% of that weight (70% of 20 is 14) and you've found your working weight. So from here on in, you'll be using 15 pound dumbbells (rounded up to closest available dumbbell weight) and performing 3 -4 sets of up to 15 reps.

Trial and Error: There's another easier and *safer* way to figure out your optimum lifting weight. Simply find a weight that you can lift (with proper form) at least 8 times, but no more than 15. It takes a bit of time, but it's the method most people use.

When do I increase the weight? When you can complete 3 sets of 15 reps, it's time to increase your weight again (usually within 4-8 weeks). With upper body, I find adding 1-3 pounds is enough, whereas legs can handle 5-10 pound increments, because they are larger muscles. You can also start decreasing your rep range from 15 reps to 8-12 reps per set. While the 15 rep range is good for building strong ligament and tendons, now it's time to get down to serious toning. Complete 3 to 4 sets of an exercise for 8-12 reps, with the last rep being difficult to complete.

When this gets easy after 3 sets, increase the weight again. Eventually you'll get topped out on weight (you can't keep upping the weight forever) and this is where other techniques need to come in in order to keep making gains. You can change exercises, and you can work the muscles from different angles (vary hand and foot positioning). You can use tubes, machines or even your own body weight. If you're not sure how to shift your routine, find a qualified personal trainer that can teach you how to maximize your training over the long haul.