

# A Stronger, Leaner and Healthier You

By: Lian Monley

**S**trength training is an important part of an overall fitness program. Here's what strength training can do for you—and how to get started.

You know exercise is good for you. You look for ways to incorporate physical activity into your daily routine and you set aside time for longer workouts at least a few times a week. But if your aerobic workouts aren't balanced by a proper dose of strength training, you're missing out on a key component of overall health and fitness.

Strength training is important for everyone. With regular strength training you burn calories more efficiently.

Muscle mass naturally diminishes with age, and if you don't do anything to replace the lean muscle you lose, you'll increase the percentage of fat in your body. Strength training can help you preserve and enhance your muscle mass at any age.

## Strength training also helps you:

**Develop strong bones.** By stressing your bones, strength training increases bone density and reduces the risk of osteoporosis.

**Control your weight.** As you gain muscle, your body burns calories more efficiently — which can result in weight loss. The more toned your muscles, the easier it is to control your weight.

**Reduce your risk of injury.** Building muscle protects your joints from injury. It also helps you maintain flexibility and balance—and remain independent, as you age.

**Boost your stamina.** As you grow stronger, you won't fatigue as easily.

**Improve your sense of well-being.** Strength training can boost your self-confidence, improve your body image and reduce the risk of depression.

**Get a better night's sleep.** People who commit to a regular strength training program are less likely to have insomnia.

**Manage chronic conditions.** Strength training can reduce the signs and symptoms of many chronic conditions, including arthritis, back pain, depression, diabetes, obesity and osteoporosis.

Strength training can be done at home or in the gym, so consider your options.

**Body weight.** You can do many exercises with little or no equipment—use your body weight instead. Try push-ups, pull-ups, abdominal crunches and leg squats.

**Resistance tubing.** Resistance tubing is inexpensive, lightweight tubing that provides resistance when stretched. You can choose from many types of resistance tubes in nearly any sporting-goods store.

**Free weights.** Barbells and dumbbells are classic strength training tools. You can also try homemade weights, such as plastic soft drink bottles filled with water or sand.

**Weight machines.** Most fitness centers offer various resistance machines. You can also invest in weight machines for use at home.

## Getting started

When you have your doctor's OK to begin a strength training program, start slowly. Warm up with five to 10 minutes of stretching or gentle aerobic activity, such as brisk walking. Then choose a weight or resistance level heavy enough to tire your muscles after about 12 repetitions.

On the 12th repetition, you should be just barely able to finish the motion. When you're using the proper weight or amount of resistance, you can build and tone muscle just as efficiently with a single set of 12 repetitions as you can with more sets of the same exercise. It is important to concentrate on doing the exercise at the right tempo, not too fast.

To give your muscles time to recover; rest one full day between exercising each specific muscle group. When you can easily do more than 15 repetitions

of a certain exercise, gradually increase the weight or resistance. Remember to stop if you feel pain. Although mild muscle soreness is normal, sharp pain and sore or swollen joints are signs that you've overdone it.

## When to expect results

You don't need to spend hours a day lifting weights to benefit from strength training. Two to three strength training sessions a week lasting just 20 to 30 minutes are sufficient for most people. You may enjoy noticeable improvements in your strength and stamina in just a few weeks. With regular strength training, you can increase your strength 50 percent or more within six months—even if you're not in shape when you begin.

Strength training can do wonders for your physical and emotional well-being. Make it part of your quest for better health. ■



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