

Weight Lifting For Beginners

I once heard and interview with a top Ironman triathlete. He was asked what part of his training regimen he would least be willing to part with. I expected him to say, running, or perhaps biking. But he surprised me by saying weight-lifting.

Most professional athletes lift weights. They realize their ability to compete as well as their longevity in a sport depends in part on being physically strong. One of my heroes is the ex-basketball player, Michael Jordan, who had a personal strength trainer during his years with the Chicago Bulls. I'm convinced this was one of the main reasons Jordan was still the best player in the world when he retired from the Bulls.

None of us are the best in the world in a sport. But the same principles of strengthening apply if we want to maintain our posture, look good, and do reasonably strenuous activities even when we are old. Think about the elderly people in our lives. Many of them are too weak to get off the toilet or get in and out of a car without assistance. What's true for them will be true for us if we disregard our muscular fitness.

Weight-lifting is based on a simple principle: use it or lose it. The older we get, the more strength we lose. This is a natural process, but it can be ameliorated if we use our strength to build it. Even the frail and elderly can regain their strength through strengthening exercises. These are simple and easy to do, they require little time and effort, and minimal investment in equipment. What they do require, however, is commitment. You must be grounded in the vision of yourself as old and strong. Then you must take the time and expend the effort necessary to make that vision a reality.

You can join a club and get yourself there on a regular basis. But unless you want to spend a lot of time pumping iron or riding exercise bikes, clubs are a waste of time. All you really need is a simple bench in a corner of one of your rooms at home and some weights under the bench. You can buy free weights (dumbbells) at your nearest Heavy Metal store or at Sears or Sports Authority. Print the list of weight lifting exercises in this section and show it to the salesman. Have him recommend the weights you'll need. Or try lifting different dumbbells yourself to find what feels right. For every exercise you'll need a weight you can lift ten times feeling relaxed most of the way and just pressing a little at the finish.

Most women will need dumbbell pairs of three, five, eight, ten, twelve and fifteen pounds. Men can start with five or eight and go to 20 pounds, with an additional investment in a barbell and plates for the bench press, military press and other exercises that require relatively heavy weight. If you want to work on your leg muscles, invest in a pair of strap-on ankle weights. You'll need about five pounds for each leg, and if you get stronger you can put the set of two weights on one leg. You can get all of these weights for a fraction of what it would cost to join a gym. And once you have them, your investment in a home gym will last a lifetime.

The workout on the next page can be done once every second or third day. It takes less than 30 minutes. You can do it before or after biking, walking or jogging. You can do each exercise only once per workout, or you can do two or three sets per exercise. Keep in mind, however, that one set of ten repetitions is enough to build or maintain basic fitness. You should also keep in mind that a weight-lifting workout is stressful if you aren't used to it. If you bite off more than you can chew you'll develop sore muscles, you'll feel tired or lethargic at work, or you could come down with a cold.

To avoid these stress symptoms, start with six repetitions the first time you do the workout. Then increase to seven repetitions the next time. Keep increasing repetitions until you are doing ten repetitions, then stay at that level. If the weight becomes so light that you are no longer pressing at the finish of ten repetitions, then add a few pounds.

I guarantee you won't get bulky with this regimen. But you will get stronger and you will tone your body with muscle that burns fat and looks good.