

What can strength training do for you?

Well, everything! Not only do you build your muscle strength, tone, and definition, but you'll burn more calories (even while you're at rest!). That's because muscle burns more calories than fat. You'll increase your bone density and mass which means your bones will be stronger. And you'll look great which will do wonders for your confidence and self esteem. Need I say more? Here's how it works.

You know exercise is good for you. And maybe you're doing cardiovascular exercise several times a week already. At least I hope you are.

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 a regular strength training program, you can reduce body fat, increase your **lean muscle mass** and **burn calories** more efficiently.



Use it or lose it

Muscle mass naturally diminishes with age. "If you don't do anything to replace the muscle you lose, you'll increase fat," says Edward Laskowski, M.D., a physical medicine and rehabilitation specialist at Mayo Clinic, Rochester, Minn., and co-director of the Mayo Clinic Sports Medicine Center. "But 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. If you already have osteoporosis, strength training can lessen its impact.
- **Control your body fat.** As you lose muscle, your body burns calories less efficiently — which can result in weight gain. 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 strength train regularly are less likely to struggle with insomnia.

Consider the options

Most fitness centers offer various resistance machines, free weights and other tools for strength training. But you don't need to invest in a membership or an expensive home gym to reap the benefits of strength training. Hand-held weights or homemade weights — such as plastic soft drink bottles filled with water or sand — may work just as well.

Resistance bands are another inexpensive option. These elastic-like cords, tubes or bands offer weight-like resistance when you pull on them. They're available in different tensions to fit a range of abilities. Of course, your own body weight counts, too. Try push-ups, pull-ups, abdominal crunches and leg squats.

Getting started

Check with your doctor before beginning any physical fitness activity. 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," Dr. Laskowski says. "When you're using the proper weight or amount of resistance, you can build muscle just as efficiently with a single set of 12 repetitions as you can with more sets of the same exercise."

To give your muscles time to recover, rest one full day between exercising each specific muscle group. When you can easily do 12 or more repetitions of a certain exercise, 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.