

## Shaking Up Your Weight Training

When it comes to working out, many of us are creatures of habit. We do what we know. We stick with what's familiar and comfortable. The catch is that if you always do the same thing the same way, your body will adapt and your results will grind to a halt. This is especially true of strength training, where you need to keep your body guessing if you want to keep seeing results. Here are some techniques for breaking through strength training plateaus and keeping the results coming:

**Exercise Variety** – It's important to regularly vary the exercises you do and the order in which you do them. Different moves recruit muscle fibers in different ways. By varying your routine, you keep your muscles changing and adapting and therefore you keep seeing results. Keep in mind that machine exercises tend to isolate the working muscle, while free weight exercises incorporate additional muscle groups for balance and stability. They both have advantages. Try to find several good exercises for each body part and alternate them regularly.

**Pre-Exhaust** – In addition to trying new exercises, experiment with their order. If you've always worked large muscle groups and compound movements first, experiment with pre-exhaust by doing isolation movements first. For example, by first working (pre-exhausting) your quadriceps on a leg extension machine, you can force your hamstrings and glutes to do more of the work on squats or leg presses. Be sure to proceed cautiously and always use a spotter for heavy or difficult movements.

**Slow lifting** – Step into any weight room, and you're almost guaranteed to see someone struggling with way too much weight, jerky movements and very poor form. Quite a few people are guilty of compromising good form in an attempt to lift heavier. If you've reached what seems like the upper limit of your capabilities, try taking a few plates off of your weight load and performing the same movement very, very slowly - try ten counts on the lifting movement and 4 counts on the lowering movement. By moving slowly and precisely through the full range of motion, you totally eliminate momentum, increase tension on the working muscle, and recruit all kinds of additional muscle fibers. You'll feel it! Be sure to cut back on the number of repetitions when training this way. Your muscle is going to fatigue much more quickly.

**Breakdown Training** – In a nutshell, this means that once you've worked a muscle to failure, you reduce the load and crank out a few more repetitions with a lighter weight. Suppose that you normally do leg curls with 70 pounds of resistance, and that you reach muscle failure after 10 repetitions. Rather than stopping at the end of the set, you would reduce the weight to 60 pounds and immediately perform 2 or 3 additional reps. This is another excellent way to up the intensity of the exercise and recruit additional muscle fibers.

**Assisted Training** – This concept is very similar to breakdown training, but it requires the help of a partner. Once you reach the point of failure on a particular exercise, your partner steps in and assists you with the movement. So, if after 10 barbell biceps curls, you can't complete another repetition with good form, your partner would step in and help you lift the bar to the top of the movement. This allows you to perform 2 or 3 post-fatigue repetitions, again upping the intensity and promoting further strength gains.

**Negative Training** – This can be approached from two slightly different angles, both of which emphasize the eccentric or lowering phase of the exercise. One option is to carefully lower more weight than you can lift (with the assistance of a qualified trainer or spotter). For example, if you're not strong enough to do chin-ups, you can have a trainer assist you to the top of the movement and then you slowly lower your own body weight. The other option is to simply emphasize the lowering portion of the exercise by slowing it down several counts. Either way, you're working the muscle in a different way, incorporating additional muscle fibers and promoting strength gains.

**Periodization** – The idea here is to avoid always using the same workload. One way to accomplish this is to set up a program of planned periodization. For example, you might do three weeks of multiple set, high repetition endurance training, followed by three weeks of increased weight and fewer repetitions, followed by three weeks of very heavy single set exercises, followed by a week off. Then you would repeat the pattern. There are numerous ways to approach periodization, but the basic idea is to keep changing the intensity at regular intervals so that your workouts don't stagnate.

**Rest** – A final reminder here. Many of these techniques can greatly increase the intensity of your workouts. As the intensity increases, so does your need for rest and recovery time. Remember that your muscles don't actually grow while you're training. They grow during the rest period between workouts. If you don't allow enough recovery time between workouts, your size and strength gains will be greatly diminished. Be sure to adjust your training schedule accordingly.

Source: Renee Cloe, A.C.E. Personal Trainer