

7 Reasons Why You Should Deadlift

As part of the “Coach’s Corner” section of our CrossFit gym’s newsletter, I was asked what my favorite exercise is. Without hesitation, I answered, “Deadlifts!” and provided a few quick reasons explaining why.

I want to devote this post to fleshing out that answer, and hopefully motivating you to incorporate them into one of your upcoming gym sessions.

1. “They make you feel like you can do anything!” The above was a direct quote from my Coach’s Corner interview, and the last—but not least!—reason I gave for loving deadlifts so obnoxiously much.

I remember the first time I deadlifted a relatively heavy weight (225 lbs at a bodyweight of 115) like it was yesterday (cue wind chimes sound effects and a fade-out to a flashback) ...

It was on a crisp, cloudy day just before Thanksgiving in 2011. My then fiancé, Ben, was busy packing up his apartment to move to San Antonio, and while I should have been helping, I simply couldn’t skip one of the last WODs (CrossFitspeak for “Workout of the Day”) I’d get to do before our wedding (I was “sweating for the wedding,” as they say ...).

I wasn’t head over heels for deadlifts quite yet. I’d only learned the movement a few months prior and hadn’t felt what I was about to experience that morning. After the workout, which consisted of light deadlifts and short sprints, one of the coaches, who happened to own the box, encouraged me to find my one-rep max, ., the heaviest weight I could lift for a single repetition. I had my reservations, namely that I didn’t want to fail in front of the class, but I couldn’t very well let

the owner down, could I? I also trusted Cune immensely. If he thought I could lift more, then I knew it was possible. So, I just let him add weight to the barbell, and I lifted it when he said, "go!"

After a few successful attempts, I found myself facing a barbell with three more plates each side than I'd originally lifted half an hour prior. I took a deep breath, tightened every muscle, and pulled.

It was the slowest deadlift in the history of the universe, I assure you. It also wasn't the prettiest. But I stood up with it, and as I did, I felt like I'd just ascended Everest and was taking in the majestic snow-capped peaks of the Himalayas. (A bit of an exaggeration, but you get the drift). There was something about facing a seemingly immovable object and then, using brute strength, getting it to budge and rise up off the floor. **It made me feel capable of anything.**

That was the day deadlifts became my favorite. It was love at first lift.

2. It works your entire body. Deadlifts simultaneously train major muscle groups ranging from your neck all the way down to your calves. To be precise, your quads, hamstrings, glutes, spinal erectors, lats, traps, abdominals, and forearms are all activated, and that's an abbreviated list! Even muscles you probably didn't know existed go to work when you deadlift, like your gastrocnemius (a calf muscle), triceps brachii (on the back of your arms), and pectoralis major (a chest muscle).

3. It helps you develop explosive strength. Explosive strength is also known as "Rate of Force Development," or RFD. RFD refers to how quickly you can reach peak levels of force in a muscle. If you improve your RFD, you'll be able to run faster, throw farther, jump higher, and perform at a more advanced level in an array of sports and physical activities.

4. It carries over to the real world. Deadlifts are a 100

percent functional movement. We all have to lift heavy objects off the ground on a regular basis, from groceries and luggage to toddlers and pets. By learning how to deadlift properly, you will more likely pick up items in a safer manner.

How many times have you heard of someone throwing out their back after lifting a heavy box off the floor? It's likely that, more often than not, these accidents occurred due to a weak lower back (a result of a deadliftless lifestyle) and improper form.

5. It strengthens your posterior chain. The posterior chain includes the calves, hamstrings, glutes, and lower back. The development of these muscles reduces the risk of injury to the lumbar area by strengthening the lumbar spinal extensors, which are the dominant stabilizers of the lower spine. A strong posterior chain also plays a significant role in one's athletic performance because the ability to maintain a neutral spine is necessary for any athletic movement.

In addition, it's worth noting that weak hamstrings and glutes are often the cause of knee pain, ACL tears or even chronic hamstring strains. Overtraining the quads and undertraining the-hams and glutes predisposes many people, especially athletes, to injury. Deadlifting is a major glute and hamstring-strengthening exercise.

6. It helps improve your posture. Deadlifts can naturally improve the positioning of your spine by strengthening your lower back and abdominals. Our lower backs are often susceptible to injury, largely due to poor posture and excessive slouching throughout the day.

7. Just about anyone can do it. There are a plethora of deadlift variations (I can count seven off the top of my head), making them doable for practically everyone. For example, the sumo deadlift is an excellent option for people with limited mobility or those lacking hip strength.

Suitcase deadlifts, which I will detail below, are one of my favorites for those who can't make it to the gym, because all you need to perform them are a pair of dumbbells, kettlebells, even jugs of milk!

A few things to keep in mind while deadlifting:

When using a barbell to deadlift, always position your shins as close to the bar as possible. This will help you keep your hips back rather than shifting your weight towards the front of the bar. It will also prevent a heavy load from pulling you forward.

Use your diaphragm to take a big breath in and fill your belly with air, then hold it in and get tight. Hold this breath until you reach the top of the lift.

Visualize driving your feet through the floor rather than pulling the bar up.

Once the bar—or pair of weights you're using—leaves floor, keep pressing your feet through the floor while at the same time focusing on bringing your chest up and hips forward.

Decrease the weight if your spine rounds or your hips and knees don't move in unison.

As a general rule, keep the rep range low. This will ensure your form stays solid. Deadlifts are an amazing tool for building strength; keeping between one and eight reps with heavy weight is a great way to capitalize on this benefit.

Always do a few non-fatiguing warm-up sets to work up to your first training weight. Then, you can either continue to increase weight for each subsequent set, or keep the same weight throughout your sets.

Here's a great beginner's deadlift variation, which, as I mentioned earlier, is also excellent for those days you can't get your hands on a barbell! Incorporate these into your

workouts one to two times a week. Try out four to five sets of eight reps at a moderate weight, then try to add a little weight the next week ... as long as your form is picture perfect!

Hold one dumbbell to the side of your body. Feet are hip-width apart.

With shoulders back, chest lifted, and lower back in a natural arch, begin lowering your body by pushing your hips back. Then bend your knees and continue moving your rear back while maintaining the arch in your lower back.

The dumbbell should be lowering in a straight path in line with your shoulder blade. When you lose the natural curve in your spine and begin to round your back, stop lowering and reverse the motion.

To initiate the lift, use your glute muscles to powerfully thrust your hips forward. Focus on keeping your torso level and not leaning or twisting toward the dumbbell.

NOTE: As your flexibility and mobility increases, you can lower the dumbbell more and more until you can touch the floor. At that point, you can try beginning the movement from the floor.

For more at-home exercises and routines, check out my book PERFECT FIT, available in paperback and for the Kindle!

Diana Anderson-Tyler is the author of Creation House's Fit for Faith: A Christian Woman's Guide to Total Fitness, Perfect Fit: Weekly Wisdom and Workouts for Women of Faith and Fitness, and her latest book, Immeasurable: Diving into the Depths of God's Love. Her popular website can be found at www.dianatyler.com and she is the owner and a coach at CrossFit 925.

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