

# The 7 Best Exercises to Make You Stronger

As a CrossFit coach, I constantly meet men and women who, though they may have a fitness background playing various sports or doing recreational activities like running or cycling, are lacking in the strength department for the simple reason that they've never lifted weights before, or at least not challenging ones.

They get excited by workouts that feature cardiovascular movements, such as box jumps, jump roping, sprinting or rowing, but when it comes to barbells, they look at them the way cows look at a new gate: totally unsure what to make of them or whether they can be trusted. They may do a few sidesteps and then scamper away, mooing for the rusty old gates they know and love.

I'm totally kidding (and hope none of my athletes take offense to the bovine metaphor), but you get the point—barbell and dumbbell training can be intimidating. But they're necessary if you want to become stronger.

Before we dive into the seven best strength-training exercises, it's important to address the statement above by deciding if you truly *want* to become stronger. For women especially, who often fear they'll look "bulky" if they weight train, lifting weights might be anathema. (If you are one such woman, I encourage you to check out my article [here](#).)

I have found that being somewhat well-versed about the fitness routine you're committed to (or, *trying to become* committed to) is terrific intrinsic motivation; having some head knowledge about the benefits of exercise helps us push our bodies as we realize, simply, that this is good for us, not to mention, honoring to God!

Check out the myriad benefits strength training has to offer and see if you don't feel a bit more motivated to pick up a dumbbell afterwards:

- Increased energy: More power and strength translates into **more usable energy**
- Improved digestion and elimination processes
- Improved memory, intellectual capacity and productivity
- Better sleep
- Weight loss: Muscle burns more calories than fat because of the higher rate of metabolism within the muscle tissues
- Stronger bones: increased bone mineral density as a result of the imposed loads being placed upon the bone during the exercise sessions
- Improved symptoms of depression
- Decreased stress
- Added protection from heart disease
- Increased self-confidence, self-perception and outward self-projection
- Body fat percentage decreases
- Lean tissue percentage increases
- Blood pressure readings decrease
- Serum cholesterol decreases
- Range of motion and flexibility increases
- Strength increases
- Lung function increases
- Bone mineral density increases
- Cardiovascular circulation capacity increases

Hopefully, you're wanting to lace up your tennis shoes, find a pair of lifting gloves, and get to the gym! But we have one pressing question to answer before you go:

Where to start?

If you've never lifted weights before, or it's been a while, it's wisest, in my opinion, to start with the basics, namely

the movements that the human body does best. These seven primary strength lifts that we naturally perform fairly well include the:

**1. Horizontal push.** Pressing/pushing a weight away from the torso. An example of a horizontal push movement is the bench press with either a barbell or set of dumbbells.

**2. Horizontal pull.** Pulling/rowing a weight towards the torso. An example of a horizontal pull movement is the bent-over row with a barbell or set of dumbbells.

**3. Vertical push.** Pushing/pressing a weight overhead, away from the body. An example of a vertical push movement is the military press.

**4. Vertical pull.** Pulling a weight towards the torso from overhead. An example of a vertical pull movement is the pull-up. (One's own bodyweight is usually sufficient, though you may do weighted pull-ups as you progress.)

**5. Squat.** Bending at the hips and knees while keeping a semi-upright torso, as if reaching for something on the ground in front of you. An example of a squat movement is the barbell squat with weight either across your upper back (back squat) or resting in front across your shoulders (front squat).

**6. Lift from the ground.** Lifting an object off the ground from a position of maximal leverage (bent knees and hips). An example of this movement is the conventional deadlift with a barbell.

**7. Carry.** Holding a dumbbell or kettlebell in either hand and walking and/or running with them. An example of a carry is a farmer's walk.

While you can perform some or all of those movements in a single workout, I would recommend splitting them up, at least initially, into two days throughout the week. The first day,

do the push/pull movements, and on the second day, perform the squats, deadlifts, and carries.

For each movement, perform three sets of 8-12 repetitions at a safe weight, meaning a weight at which you feel comfortable and your form is solid. Rest for two to three minutes between sets, and complete all three sets before moving on to the next exercise.

Make sure you concentrate on perfecting your technique throughout each and every set. Once you've nailed these movements, you can begin to superset them, meaning alternating a pushing set (bench press, for example) with a pulling set (bent-over rows), or a deadlift set with a squat set. Supersetting is a very efficient, time-saving way to train because it allows you to cut down on total rest time by only giving one group of muscles time to chill while another group takes the stage.

Now that we have a training plan in place, it's time for some instructions on the seven movements I recommend you start out with: the barbell bench press, barbell bent-over row, dumbbell press, assisted pull-up, goblet squat, suitcase deadlift, and farmer's walk. If possible, ask a certified personal trainer, CrossFit coach, or other fitness professional to assist you with your form, or, at the very least, watch a few YouTube videos (from reputable sources!) to help you become confident in performing these exercises safely and proficiently.

Follow this routine for six to eight weeks, adding weight and/or sets and repetitions as needed. (No more than 12 reps; if you can do more than 12 reps without a problem, it's time to add more weight!)

### **Barbell Bench Press**

- a. Load appropriate weight, lie face-up on the flat bench.
- b. Grab the barbell above you with an overhand grip slightly

wider than shoulder-width.

c. Lift the bar off the rack and slowly lower it until the bar hovers two or three inches above your chest.

d. Pause, then explosively push the barbell back up. Do not lock your elbows at the top of the motion.

### **Barbell Bent-Over Row**

a. Bend knees slightly and bend over bar with back straight. Grasp bar with wide overhand grip.

b. Pull bar to upper waist. Return until arms are extended and shoulders are stretched downward. Repeat.

*NOTE: If your lower back becomes rounded due to tight hamstrings, either try bending knees more, or don't position your torso as low.*

### **Strict Dumbbell Press**

a. Stand with arms at your sides with a dumbbell in each hand. Feet should be hip-width apart.

b. Raise the dumbbells to shoulder-level, and rotate your hands so your fists face away from your body. Your elbows should be tight to your body with your forearms directly under the dumbbell handles.

c. Push the dumbbells upwards by lengthening your arms. Continue until your arms are completely extended overhead.

d. Lower the weights to start position, just until your upper arms are parallel with the floor.

*NOTE: Ensure your back stays in a neutral position. Don't lean forward or backward; doing so could result in increased pressure on the spine, which may lead to injury.*

### **Assisted Pull-Up With Resistance Band**

a. Place your foot in the resistance band so that the band centers in the middle of your shoe. Hold onto the bar with a grip that's wider than shoulder-width, and wrap the free foot in front of the foot in the band. Press down through the band so that you are essentially standing up inside of it.

b. Imagine you want to bring the bar down too your chest. This will help you pull up toward the bar until your chin is over it. Really squeeze your shoulder blades together to engage your back muscles.

c. Slowly, with control, lower yourself back down to the start position. Do not lock out your arms at the bottom, but maintain a slight bend in your elbows.

### **Goblet Squat with Kettlebell or Dumbbell**

a. Either hold a kettlebell by its horns or the end of a dumbbell at your chest. Stand with feet shoulder-width apart, torso upright.

b. With the weight against your chest, squat down with the goal of having your elbows slide down along the inside of your knees. It's okay to have the elbows push the knees out a bit as you descend. Focus on keeping your back flat.

c. Rise out of the squat by driving through your heels.

### **Suitcase Deadlift**

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

b. With shoulders back, chest lifted, and lower back in a natural arch, being 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.

c. 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.

d. 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.*

### **Farmer's Walk**

a. Grip a pair of dumbbells, then lift them up by driving through your heels, keeping your back straight and your head up.

b. Walk taking short, quick steps, and don't forget to breathe. Move for a given distance, typically 50-100 feet, as fast as possible.

Have fun, and feel free to Tweet me @dianamtyler with any questions.

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