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Total Body Strength Training

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Strong Medicine - Prescription for Muscle Conditioning

By **Susannah Kent**

There is a tendency for people to panic when approaching the age of 30. Perhaps it's an unconscious realization that the body has already started to age.

It has been estimated that lean muscle mass may decrease by as much as half between the ages of 20 and 90 (American College of Sports Medicine). This loss of muscle mass means not only loss of strength, but also a gain of fibrous connective tissue and adipose tissue (or more simply fat). Fortunately, it is easy to combat this symptom of aging by becoming more active.

One sure way to combat the loss of muscle mass is to incorporate full body strength or resistance/weight training into our regular exercise program. Most people equate exercise with activity that is cardiovascular in nature, running, walking, cycling and so on. The focus is on how far and how fast they can go, and how much they can sweat. These people may have great lungs and strong heart muscles, but they struggle carrying a bag of groceries from the car to the house. This is because their workouts are not complete. They need to add strength training into the mix.

Muscles are fibrous bands or bundles that represent about 40% of body weight. The human body has over 700 skeletal muscles which act like cables on our bones, contracting and lengthening in order to create movement. If muscles are weak then movement is compromised, impairing our ability to perform simple everyday tasks. Resistance training can reverse this.

The key ingredient in the concept of increasing strength is the overload principle. If you make more demands of a muscle by asking it to operate beyond its current intensity, that muscle will over time increase in size and capability. If your arms, back and chest are weak your ability to lift will be diminished. If you begin to use resistance equipment and perform exercises specific to those body parts you will train those muscles so that they grow and become stronger.

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Weighing the Benefits

It has been scientifically proven that a regular weight or resistance training exercise program makes a person stronger. But it is not only muscle size that is increased. Bones benefit too. Increased bone strength means more bone density which reduces the risk of osteoporosis. Ligaments and tendons that support the joints are strengthened as well, and this means less chance of injury. If injured, an already strong body can recover more quickly.

When a person strength trains, their muscle fibers enlarge and consume more energy. Increased consumption of energy means calories are being burned more quickly and efficiently. This makes it easier to control weight. So if you want to maintain your current weight or lose a few pounds, it is a good idea to add a few pounds to your workout.

Strength is not only for the athletic or macho, pumped, hard body type. Building a stronger body can enhance the quality of life for everyone as it improves performance of necessary everyday activities. As we age, this becomes increasingly important if we are to maintain independence. Ultimately, strength training can make our bodies stronger, leaner and healthier. And who doesn't want results like these?

Training and Safety Tips

Before you start a strength or weight training program, consult a health care or fitness specialist, especially if you are over 40 or have been inactive for a long time.

Begin with an appropriate amount of resistance. The rule of thumb is the weight you lift should make your muscles feel tired after 8-12 repetitions. Complete a set of exercises just until the point of fatigue. A weight that causes fatigue at 12 reps is enough for a muscle to grow.

Maintain good posture and breathing techniques. For posture "think tall" and breaths should be out with exertion and in with release.

Go for balance. Make sure you don't over or under train a specific muscle group.

Set realistic goals. Not everyone responds to strength training in the same way. Genetics and subsequent body type will determine that. So while most people will experience an increase of 20-40% after strength training for several months, it is most important to focus on how you feel rather than how you may look.

Don't forget to warm up and stretch.

Don't overdo it. Most people should not strength train more than three times a week

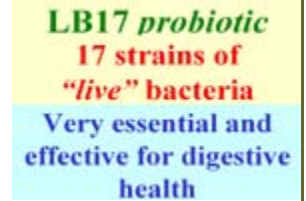
To stay motivated vary your workouts and consider getting a partner or personal trainer to work with.

Some Tools of the Trade

Free Weights: These are weights that are not connected to anything. There are two types of free weights – barbells, which are long bars with weights attached or slots to add weight plates if additional resistance is desired; and



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dumbbells or hand-held weights that come in an assortment of sizes and weights, usually between 1 and 10 pounds.

Resistance Bands: Portable, multicoloured, oversized rubber bands. The width and colour of the band is associated with the amount of resistance. You may recognize a popular trade name for these known as Dynabands. Physiotherapists often use this type of resistance tool.

Balls: There are two main types of balls used for strength training – medicine balls which can weigh from 2 to 20 pounds; and stability balls, which are large and light and meant to sit or lie on. The object is to build more and different muscles at the same time, particularly the core, abdominal and back muscles.

Machines: There is a whole host of variable resistance machines. Found mostly at gyms, machines are usually easier and safer for people new to resistance training.

Body Weight or Calisthenics: Things like push ups, and squats where your own body weight and gravity are the resistance tools.

The Lebert Equalizer: This prop was just introduced to me by its creator, Certified Personal Trainer and NLP Practitioner, Marc Lebert. The Equalizer is a set of portable, stable, eight-pound, upside down U-shaped, yellow bars that at first glance made me ask what in heck are they for? I found out when Marc came to demonstrate the Equalizer to my Seniors Movement Therapy class recently. As I told him after the class, my tricep muscles have never had such a great workout. This piece of equipment is simple and unbelievably effective with which over 75 exercises can be performed. Forget those gimmicky exercise infomercials. If you're looking for a tool to help you get in shape, that won't cost an arm and a leg (but will make your arms and legs look and feel great), the Equalizer might be just the thing. I always tell people when they ask about the effectiveness of various exercise props that if it sounds too easy, it probably doesn't work. And that's what I liked most about the Equalizer. It made so many exercises possible, but it didn't make them easy. And if you want to increase your strength there is no substitute for some regular hard work. Using your own body weight in conjunction with the Equalizer makes strength training safe, effective, innovative, challenging, and for those of you who like hard work, fun. You can see more on the Lebert Equalizer at Marc's website www.lebertequalizer.com.

Resistance Samplers

There are numerous and excellent resources available on the subject of strength training that can help you get started. It is advisable to consult with an expert before you begin to ensure the safety and efficacy of your program. Below is a brief list of some strength training exercises.

Upper Body

- *Chest:* push up, bench press, chest fly
- *Arms:* bicep curl, tricep extension
- *Shoulders:* shoulder raises

– *Back*: upright row, back extension

Middle Body

– *Abdominals*: basic crunch, the bicycle

Lower Body

– *Legs*: squats, hamstring curls, heel raises, inner and outer thigh leg lifts

Mind Your Muscles

If we want to be able to work longer and harder before fatigue sets in, better control our weight, reverse age related decline in muscle and bone strength, and stay healthy and independent well into old age then strength training is an essential part of any health maintenance regimen. Our muscles are very smart, forgiving and accommodating. If we work them regularly, make sure we don't overdue it and stretch after a workout (I like to call this minding our muscles) they will respond by getting stronger, tauter and more toned. When asked why we should strength train, I always answer – because it will make everyday life simpler, healthier and most likely make that life longer.

Susannah Kent is a Toronto area Fitness and Healthy Lifestyle Instructor. You can reach her by email: susannahssoapbox@yahoo.com