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THE BEST BACK EXERCISES TO BUILD YOUR BEST BACK EVER



I used to make two major mistakes in my back workouts:

01. I focused too much on the wrong back exercises. I spent far too much time on machines and isolation exercises and far too little time on compound exercises like the deadlift and barbell row.

02. I did too much high-rep “pump” training and too little heavy strength training. Training to get a pump (rather than to get stronger) is one of the easiest ways to hit a plateau. You see, I used to do a lot of drop sets, supersets, giant sets, and so forth, and very little heavy strength training.

That worked fine for a bit but, after a year or so, I found that my progress in the gym and mirror had stagnated. I wasn’t gaining reps or adding weight to my exercises and I wasn’t seeing any improvements in my physique.

Well, now I know why. After many years of making these mistakes, I radically changed my back workouts. I started doing more compound movements than isolation and more heavy training, and I finally started seeing real changes in my back (and entire physique) for the first time in a long time.

Now, if those two points above have you scratching your head because they go against a lot of what you’ve heard and/or assumed about bodybuilding, I understand.

This touches on one of the biggest lessons I’ve learned about weightlifting and building muscle naturally, though.

Namely: If you want to build muscle consistently and effectively, you want to focus on heavy (80 to 85% of your one-rep max) compound weightlifting.

In terms of back workouts, that means your bread and butter is heavy barbell and dumbbell pulling, and your dessert is supplementary work like pull-ups and certain machines.

You can build a fantastic back with a bit of know-how, hard work, and patience.

And here’s how...

01. Focus on lifting heavy weights in your back workouts. And by “heavy,” I mean working primarily in the 4 to 6 or 5 to 7 rep range.

02. Focus on the back exercises that safely allow for progressive overload. Here's a simple maxim of natural weightlifting: If you stop getting stronger, you'll stop getting bigger.

The number one rule of natural muscle building is progressive overload, which refers to progressively increasing tension levels in the muscle over time. The most effective way to do this is adding weight to the bar. And you do that by working with a given weight until you can get a certain number of reps, at which point you increase the weight.

03. Don't over- or under-train your back muscles. Another element of your back workouts that you have to get right is weekly volume (the total amount of reps you do each week).

If your weekly volume is too low, you'll gain less muscle than you should or could. If it's too high, you'll fall behind in recovery and struggle with issues related to overtraining, which, in time, means you'll gain less muscle than you should or could.

Finding the "sweet spot" can be tricky because, when you're doing a lot of heavy weightlifting, the heavier the reps, the fewer you can do each week. When you're primarily training with heavy weights (80 to 85%+ of your 1RM), optimal volume seems to be about 60 to 70 reps performed every 5 to 7 days.

THE BEST BACK EXERCISES

Deadlift

The deadlift is, hands down, the best all-around back exercise you can do. In fact, it's one of the best all-around exercises for your entire body because it involves hundreds of muscles and allows for tremendous overload.

Ironically, the deadlift is a fantastic exercise for building lower back strength and preventing injury...when it's done properly. That said, if you've injured your lower back in the past or are dealing with lower back issues, you may not want to deadlift (or may need to do a variation like the sumo or hex bar deadlift).

How to Deadlift

01. Position your feet so they're slightly narrower than shoulder-width apart.

02. Place the bar somewhere between against your shins and over the middle of your feet.

03. Stand up tall with your chest out and take a deep breath of air into your diaphragm (not your lungs).
04. Move down toward the bar by pushing your hips back, not by squatting straight down.
05. Place your hands on the bar just outside your shins.
06. Keep your head in a neutral position.
07. Drive your body upward and slightly back as quickly as you can by pushing through your heels.
08. As you approach the top (the lock-out), squeeze your glutes to push your hips into the bar.
09. Don't break the lockout with your knees.
10. As you descend, maintain a tight core and stiff lower back and keep your shoulders down.
11. Reset for your next rep.

Sumo Deadlift

The sumo deadlift is similar to the traditional deadlift but uses a wide stance (1.5 to 2 times the width of your shoulders). This shortens the range of motion and keeps the torso more upright, which reduces the amount of shearing force placed on the spine.

Hex Bar Deadlift

The hex bar deadlift is what it sounds like: a deadlift using a special "hex bar" (also known as a "trap bar"). This is a good way to learn to deadlift because it doesn't require as much hip and ankle mobility as conventional and sumo pulling and it puts less shearing stress on the spine. The hex bar deadlift also allows you to lift more weight than the conventional deadlift, which may make it a more effective exercise for developing overall lower body power.

Barbell Row

Like the deadlift, the barbell row is a staple in many weightlifting programs because it works everything in the back from top to bottom.

Pendlay Barbell Row

My favorite style of barbell row is known as a Pendlay row (named after the prominent strength coach Glenn Pendlay). I prefer it because it allows you to work through a larger range of motion, which means your upper back has to work even harder. And in case you're worried about your lower back, if you're keeping your form in and deadlifting every week, you'll never be rowing enough weight to cause an issue.

Dumbbell Row

The dumbbell row is another fantastic compound exercise for the back, and particularly for the lats.

T-Bar Row

The t-bar row is another type of row that is a solid back builder. I generally stay away from machines, but actually prefer the hammer strength t-bar machine over the barbell setup.

Chin-Up & Pull-Up

They train every major muscle in your back and involve the biceps to a significant degree as well. There are many pull-up variations you can do, of course, but you should build a foundation of strength with these two before progressing to more advanced types.

Lat Pulldown (Wide- and Close-Grip)

The lat pulldown is a machine variant of the pullup that allows you to adjust the weight you're pulling.

Seated Cable Row (Wide- and Close-Grip)

The seated row is yet another type of row that's great for building your upper back.

Standing Pushdown

Last but not least is the standing pushdown, which is a fantastic exercise for isolating the lats.

REMEMBER—PROGRESSION IS THE KEY TO MUSCLE GROWTH

Remember that your goal isn't to just do these exercises, though—it's to progress on them. And we recall that when we're talking building muscle, the most productive

type of progression is “progressive overload.” This is why your primary goal as a natural weightlifter is to gain reps and strength.

THE ULTIMATE BACK WORKOUT

A well-designed back workout uses mainly compound exercises to train all the major muscles of the upper and lower back. Below you’ll find a simple but effective back workout that I’ve created for you.

Do it once every 5 to 7 days for the next 8 weeks and see how your body responds. I think you’ll be pleasantly surprised.

Deadlift

Warm up and 3 sets of 4 to 6 reps (about 85% of 1RM)

Barbell Row

3 sets of 4 to 6 reps

Wide-Grip Pull-ups (Chin-Ups if you can’t)

3 sets of 4 to 6 reps (add weight if possible)

Optional

One-Arm Dumbbell Rows

3 sets of 4 to 6 reps

A few odds and ends:

- ✓ Optional sets are up to you. If you’re an advanced lifter, or you feel you have more in you at the end of the workout, you can do the final 3 sets. Nine heavy sets per workout is plenty, though.
- ✓ Once you hit the top of your rep range for one set, add weight to the exercise. This is how you ensure you progress over time. It’s vitally important.
- ✓ Rest 3 minutes in between each set. Yes, this is going to feel like a lot of standing around, but resting properly is a hugely important part of heavy

weightlifting. This is the time where your muscles recoup their strength so you can give maximum effort each set.

- ✓ Make sure you're eating enough food. Most people know that high protein intake is necessary to maximize muscle growth but don't know that calorie intake also plays a major role.

WHAT ABOUT SUPPLEMENTS?

I saved this for last because, quite frankly, it's far less important than proper diet and training. You see, supplements don't build great physiques—dedication to proper training and nutrition does.

So, while workout supplements don't play a vital role in building muscle and losing fat, and many are a complete waste of money...the right ones can help.

For the purpose of this article, let's just quickly review the supplements that are going to help you get the most out of your bodyweight (and other) workouts.

01. Creatine

Supplementation with creatine helps...

- ✓ Build muscle and improve strength
- ✓ Improve anaerobic endurance
- ✓ Reduce muscle damage and soreness

If you have healthy kidneys, I highly recommend that you supplement with creatine. It's safe, cheap, and effective. In terms of specific products, I use my own, of course, which is called RECHARGE.

RECHARGE is 100% naturally sweetened and flavored and each serving contains:

- ✓ 5 grams of creatine monohydrate
- ✓ 2100 milligrams of L-carnitine L-tartrate

- ✓ 10.8 milligrams of corosolic acid

This gives you the proven strength, size, and recovery benefits of creatine monohydrate plus the muscle repair and insulin sensitivity benefits of L-carnitine L-tartrate and corosolic acid.

02. Protein Powder

You don't need protein supplements to gain muscle, but, considering how much protein you need to eat every day to maximize muscle growth, getting all your protein from whole food can be impractical.

That's the main reason I created (and use) a whey protein supplement. (There's also evidence that whey protein is particularly good for your post-workout nutrition.) WHEY+ is 100% naturally sweetened and flavored whey isolate that is made from milk sourced from small dairy farms in Ireland, which are known for their exceptionally high-quality dairy.

03. Pre-Workout Drink

There's no question that a pre-workout supplement can get you fired up to get to work in the gym. But the reality is it's very hard to find a pre-workout supplement that's light on stimulants but heavy on natural, safe, performance-enhancing ingredients like beta-alanine, betaine, and citrulline.

And that's why I made my own pre-workout supplement. It's called PULSE and it contains 6 of the most effective performance-enhancing ingredients available:

- | | |
|---------------------|-------------|
| ✓ Caffeine | ✓ Betaine |
| ✓ Beta-Alanine | ✓ Ornithine |
| ✓ Citrulline Malate | ✓ Theanine |

And what you won't find in PULSE is equally special:

- ✓ No artificial sweeteners or flavors.
- ✓ No artificial food dyes.
- ✓ No unnecessary fillers, carbohydrate powders, or junk ingredients.

In many ways, back training is like leg training. You're dealing with the largest muscle groups in the body and they take a tremendous amount of hard work to fully develop.

There are no shortcuts or "secrets." You're not going to have the dream back in a few weeks or a few months. But, keep showing up and keep progressing on your pulling and you will get there.

Good luck!

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