

# STRENGTH TRAINING FOR WOMEN

*Get Lean, NOT Bulky!*



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## Why Strength Training?

### The Powerful Benefits of Lifting Weights

Women tend to avoid strength training and weightlifting. There are many reasons why, and the vast majority of those reasons are based in myth and preconceptions about what weight training is and what it does to a female body. We'll take a look at those myths shortly. First, it's important to talk about what strength training does, and what it has to offer women specifically, because there really is a tremendously long list of positives for women.

#### More Muscle, Less Fat

Strength training and weightlifting increase the capacity of your muscles. You have them. You have biceps, glutes, hamstrings, and abdominals. When you work your muscles in this way, through lifting weights, you incur small tears to your muscles. As these tears repair, your muscles get stronger.

Now it not only takes energy to repair those muscle fibers (energy that burns fat and calories), it also takes a tremendous amount of energy to sustain your muscles.

That means that you burn calories and fat while you work out, after you work out, and that your metabolism becomes faster, which means you're burning more calories overall.



***"Muscle tissue burns more calories than fat tissue does, muscle mass is a key factor in weight loss"*** (Source: Mayo Clinic).

## **Better Posture**

Strength training has the impact of making you become more aware of your body. You feel stronger, and that often translates into better confidence and improved posture. You feel empowered. However, it also facilitates better posture on a musculoskeletal level.

Your bones, ligaments, tendons, and muscles all become stronger. Generally speaking, poor posture is evidence of weakness. It's often a sign of a weak core. Weightlifting changes that. Your core muscles become powerful and you not only sit up straighter, you walk better too. It improves how you function.

## **Improved Energy Levels and Health**

When you strength train, your body creates a bit of what's called "Free Testosterone." Now don't worry about weightlifting making you look like a man. It won't, and we'll address that in more detail in the "myths" section below.

However, it's important to know that testosterone is important for female energy and vitality. It impacts your metabolism, your sexual function, and your muscular function. In short, you'll feel better and look better with a bit of testosterone created by strength training.

## **Feel and Look Better**

Weightlifting improves your energy levels, it kick starts your sex drive, and, let's face it, you just look better in your clothing. You'll be more aware of your body and what it's capable of. And while everyone starts strength training at a different level, the benefits are across the board.

## Osteoporosis and Aging

There are a few things that happen as a woman gets older, and I'm sorry to tell you that this process begins around age 30. Your bones start losing density. This means that they become weaker and osteoporosis can develop.

You also tend to decrease muscle and gain fat – we can thank our lovely hormones for this impact from aging. However, weightlifting can slow down these effects. Weightlifting slows down the loss of bone density dramatically, thus preventing fractures and spinal issues that range from fractures to a slouching posture.

And while you may not be thinking about it right now, but menopause can cause the female body to put on fat pounds. A strength training regimen not only helps balance hormones, it also helps you maintain and build new muscle mass, which in turn burns that potential fat.

So you know that weightlifting offers everything from preventing osteoporosis to helping you look great in your swimsuit.

Let's tackle those myths next because you're bound to hear them, and you don't want them to get in your way of succeeding.

## Five Myths to Let Go of Before You Start

As mentioned, myths are pervasive in the fitness industry. Some of them come from poor information while others are based in fear. Let's explore the most common myths so you can go forward with the best information and high confidence.

### Myth #1 You'll Get Bulky If You Lift Weights

This just isn't really possible for women. Women don't have the same quantity of muscle fibers that men do, and they don't have the same level of testosterone. In fact, women have testosterone levels that are 15 to 20 times lower than the average man's levels. They just cannot bulk up.

So if you're worried about "*looking like a man*" if you lift weights, you can relax. It won't happen.

Will your muscles get bigger? Possibly.

Will you get leaner? Most likely, especially if you blend diet and exercise into your daily lifestyle.

Will you feel great and enjoy the benefits we've already discussed? Absolutely.

So don't worry about getting bulky muscles. You'll get amazing strength and definition, and you'll look great.



## **Myth #2 Weightlifting is Dangerous**

Many people fear they'll get injured if they lift weights. They hear horror stories and it all gets chalked up to "weightlifting is dangerous." It's not dangerous if you follow a few common sense guidelines:

- Warm up your muscles
- Learn and practice proper form
- Pay attention to your body
- Don't let your ego get you into trouble
- Have a spotter for the movements that require one (for example, the bench press)

Easy enough, right? Embrace these guidelines into your weightlifting regimen and you'll be fine. Could you get injured? Of course, there's a risk in any type of exercise, but the risk is no greater for weightlifting than it is for anything else.

You could get injured walking down the stairs or picking up a bag of dog food, so it's better to strengthen your muscles and be proactive. You'll actually prevent injuries.

## **Myth #3 Cardio Is the Only Thing That Burns Fat**

Um.... wrong. Lifting weights increases the number of calories you burn every hour of every day. And remember that when you strength train, your muscles are broken down, and then rebuilt. This requires calories and energy, which kicks your metabolism into high gear and burns fat.

Building muscle through strength training burns significantly more calories than cardio. That doesn't mean that you ignore cardio. It has benefits as well, including increasing your internal systems including your heart and lungs, as well as your hormonal systems.

However, if you really want to burn fat and get into shape quickly, make sure that you have a consistent strength training routine.

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## **Myth #4 You Can Tone and Shape a Muscle**

Many fitness industry folks use this statement to get you to buy their products. The truth is that you can't shape a muscle. Your muscle's shape is predetermined by your genetics. And let's also address the myth that if you don't use a muscle, it turns to fat.

Muscle cells are different from fat cells; they're not interchangeable. A fat cell can't become muscle. It can, however, shrink. And a muscle cell can't become fat. It can, however, grow. And therein lies the power of weightlifting. You'll shrink fat cells and grow muscle cells, so your fat won't hide your beautiful and strong muscles.

Bottom line...you can't change the shape of your muscle. What you can do is burn the fat that's hiding your muscles, so they are easier to see and you can make your muscles stronger.

## **Myth #5 Women Shouldn't Go Heavy**

Why not? There's no reason why a woman shouldn't lift heavy weights. It's really the only way to test your strength and to get stronger. Some fitness folks will tell you that women should lift a light weight and increase their reps.

They'll also tell you in the same breath that this is how you shape and tone a muscle. So they're justifying a myth with a myth.

Lifting a light weight 50 times doesn't make you stronger. Lifting a moderately heavy weight 50 times can. And you can go heavier too. That's how you get stronger. And let's face it, it's a lot more fun to find your five rep max for the deadlift than to deadlift an empty barbell 100 times.

Now, there's a caveat to going heavy. Remember back when we talked about weightlifting not being dangerous? Going heavy means that you're embracing all of those guidelines like using proper form, not letting your ego get in the way and also having a spotter when one is necessary.

Don't try to lift 200 pounds if you've never lifted 190. Make sense?

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Now that you know weightlifting is fantastic for your health and wellness, and that you're going to look and feel amazing, and you have the correct information on many of the myths about weightlifting, let's start by talking about the equipment you'll need to be able to strength train at home.

And here's something fun to think about when considering a home strength training routine; it doesn't require a significant time commitment!

## Weightlifting Equipment

When you're getting started with weightlifting, it's important to find equipment that supports your training program and goals. So we're going to talk about a couple different options that you can look into, and then we'll take a look at some considerations when setting up your home gym.

### Bodyweight Is Great

First and foremost, let's start by saying that bodyweight strength training is a great place to start. You perform 50 body weight "good mornings" or 50 bodyweight squats and you've never done any strength training, you're going to feel your muscles the next day. So if you've never lifted any weights and you're feeling hesitant about it, try a few bodyweight days first. You can then move on and add light dumbbells and barbells.

### Kettlebells

The Kettlebell looks like a bowling ball with a handle. It's a weighted ball that comes in a variety of different weights. You'll often find them in kilograms, however you can also find them in pounds as well. They're often sold in sets so you can buy a range, or you can buy them in singles. Generally speaking, the smallest weight kettlebell is about 18 pounds.

You can use kettlebells for everything from shoulder presses to deadlifts or "good mornings" which is a hamstring and gluteal movement we'll explain shortly.

Anything you'd do with a dumbbell or a barbell, you can likely do with a kettlebell. The downside to these is that holding onto a kettlebell can be tricky for some movements, but it's also easier for others. Check them out at your local sporting goods store and see how they feel in your hands.



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## Dumbbells

Dumbbells are small weights. They fit in your hand and go from about three pounds to seventy-five. Like a kettlebell, they're good for a wide variety of movements including the shoulder press and deadlift. You can even use them for tricky Olympic weightlifting movements like the snatch or the clean and jerk.

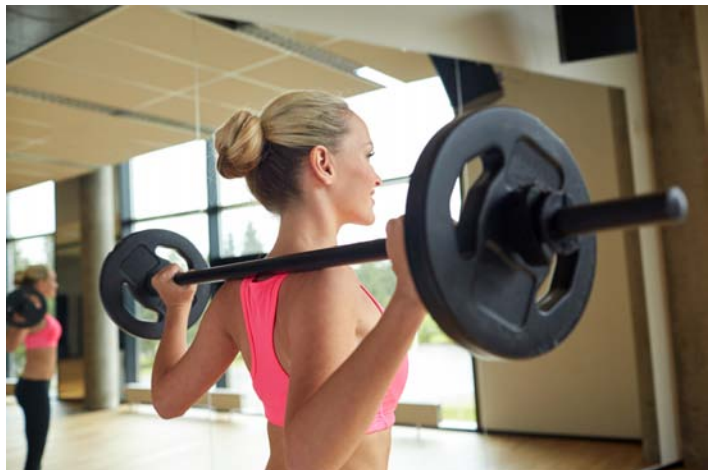


They're compact and easy to store in your home gym (as are kettlebells). You can purchase them in packs or singles depending on what your needs are. Generally, you should buy two of each weight. So for example, if you want to buy a 25-pound dumbbell, you should buy two – one for each hand. This will be necessary for many movements.

## Barbell

A barbell is a long bar that is about seven feet long. In Olympic weightlifting there are different barbells for men and for women.

The men's weighs about 45 pounds and the women's weighs 35. The thickness of the bar is a little bigger for men as well.



This really doesn't matter unless you're competing. If you find a good barbell and it happens to be 45 pounds, that's fine. If it feels good in your hands, that's more important. Women with smaller hands may prefer the 35-pound bar.

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It should be noted that if you find a lighter bar, that's fine too. As long as you know the weight of your barbell, you can do the math as you add weights. It really doesn't matter if you're starting with a 15-pound barbell or a 45-pound barbell.

The ends of the barbell are thicker than the middle and there should be a cuff to stop the weights from sliding across the bar. You'll also want to purchase weight plates and clips keep the weights from falling off of the barbell.

## **Weights**

Once you have a barbell, you'll probably want to have some weights to go with it. Weights start at 1.25 pounds and go up to 45. You may find variations on this, but that's generally what you'll find in a sporting goods store. You may also find weights in kilograms. That's fine as long as you're able to do the conversions. One kilogram is equal to 2.2 pounds. You'll also want to make sure that the weights you buy fit on your barbell.

## **Rack**

A rack is a stand that you can use to bring your barbell up from the ground. Some movements are easier to perform if your barbell is at chest level. For example, if you're going to do a back squat then you'll want the barbell at chest or shoulder level.

For the back squat, you get under the barbell with it on your shoulders behind your neck. You then step back and away from the rack and squat.

When the movement is completed you'll step back to the rack and put the barbell back on it by lowering your body and lightly dropping the bar back in the rack.

A rack can also be used for bench press and a number of other movements. When buying a rack, strength and stability are critically important. It needs to have a wide enough base that there's no risk of the rack tipping over.

## Bench

A bench is exactly what it sounds like. You'll most often use a bench for a bench press movement. However, there may be other uses for a bench.

At this point it's important to point out that you can find this type of weightlifting equipment in a number of places. You can of course find a set at your local sporting goods store. You can join a gym and use their equipment.

Women tend to avoid this option because the free weight area in a gym is often filled with men. It may feel uncomfortable, competitive, and unwelcoming to women. If this is the case and you want to work out at the gym, then consider finding a few other women to work out with. There's strength, and confidence, in numbers.

You can also buy used gear. Any used sports equipment store will undoubtedly have a good supply of weights. The key here is to make sure that the equipment that you buy works together. Remember that some barbells may be smaller and may not fit the weights you buy. Olympic weightlifting equipment should all work together, so that's an easy standard to look for.



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## Workout Clothing Considerations

Finally, let's talk about what to wear when you're lifting weights. When you're beginning, it's easiest to wear flat shoes. That way you don't have a raised heel getting in the way of proper movement. If you don't have any flat shoes, Converse actually work pretty well, or consider going barefoot. Just don't drop anything on your feet.

As you progress (and if you get into Olympic weightlifting), you might invest in some Oly shoes. These shoes have a raised heel that's hard, often made of wood. It helps with stability and good mobility in the movement.

Weight belts are generally only recommended once you've achieved a high degree of skill and strength. They enhance an already strong core, but the core should be strong before you invest in one.

For your workout clothing, you simply want to make sure that you have freedom of movement and that you can see your body clearly. For example, if you wear a pair of baggy pants you may not be able to see clearly how your knee is bending and its position in reference to your ankle. Tights or shorts may be easier.

People often like to wear gloves when they lift weights. Your hands can get sweaty and gloves may help. Chalk can help with this as well. You don't want the weights slipping in your hands.

Now that you're properly equipped, it's time to talk about the different weightlifting movements.



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## Movements to Start With

We're going to talk about each movement from a bodyweight perspective. We'll then offer tips on how to perform the movement with weights. Also look for tips for success integrated throughout. Ready?

### The Lunge

The lunge is a movement that works your quads, your hamstrings, and your glutes. Essentially, it's a very good lower body movement. To perform the lunge, you:

1. Stand with your feet together.
2. Take one large step forward with one foot.
3. Lower your back leg until your knee lightly taps the ground.
4. Look at your front leg. Your knee should not be bent more than 90 degrees and it should be positioned over your toes.
5. Push up using the strength of your front leg.
6. Step forward with your other leg and repeat the movement.



If you have limited space, you can bring your front foot back and then step forward with the other foot. This way, you're not traveling across the floor, you're staying in place. Performing this movement with bodyweight is always a good place to start. However, you can and should eventually add weight.

**Dumbbells/kettlebells** – You can perform the lunge with a weight in each hand. You can keep your hands at your sides, put the weights at your shoulders, or hold them overhead. If you hold them over your head, keep your arms locked and close to your ears for stability.

**Barbell** – The barbell gives you a number of options. You can hold the bar on your back with your hands just outside your shoulders. You can also hold the bar in front of you, in your front rack. This is with your elbows up high and your fingers gently holding the barbell against your neck.

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Keeping your elbows up high helps keep your back straight with this movement. You might start with an empty barbell. You can also hold the barbell overhead as you lunge. Find a hand position that supports you to stay upright and keep your shoulders stable.

## The Squat

The squat is a simple movement that can build tremendous lower body strength. The standard squat starts with your feet hip width apart. Push your rear end back like you're sitting in a chair and bend your knees. Lower your body until your hips are at or below parallel with your knees.

That's the bottom of your squat. If you can't get this low because of ankle or knee mobility, find a box or a ball that you can squat to.

It's important that you keep your knees out and that they track over your toes.

You can squat with bodyweight first so that you feel comfortable with the movement. Then you can add weight to the movement much in the same way that you added weight with the lunge.



1. **Barbell** – You can place the barbell on your back, in your front rack, or overhead. Keep in mind that it's important to keep your back as straight as possible so that the barbell stays in a straight line. If you lean forward, or back, you can drop the barbell.
2. **Dumbbells/Kettlebells** – If you're squatting with a kettlebell, try holding one kettlebell upside down in your two hands, so you're cupping the ball part of the kettlebell. Then squat. You can also place dumbbells on your shoulders or overhead and squat.



## The Shoulder Press

The shoulder press is a movement that pushes or presses weight off of your shoulders. It's a strict movement but there are variations. Standing with your feet under you and the weight on your shoulders (you can use a barbell or dumbbells), press them over your head. The movement ends with your arms locked out overhead.

The push press is a movement that allows you to lift a bit more weight. Instead of pressing the weight from your shoulders, you dip down a bit by bending your knees. When you stand up quickly you get a bit of momentum and at that moment, you press the weight overhead.

The push jerk gives you the ability to lift even more weight. When you dip and bend your knees and press the bar up, you can then drop below it. This means that the weight doesn't have to be pushed up as high because you're dropping below it.



It's great to practice these movements with an empty barbell. Or, if that's a bit too much weight to start, consider using a broomstick or a piece of PVC pipe. The goal is to become comfortable with the movement before you start adding weight. Keep your core tight when you perform the movement. Take a deep breath in before and exhale at the top.

Finally, let's not forget or neglect the good old fashioned movements like pushups, sit-ups, dips, and pullups. You can do these with bodyweight or, if you want, you can add weight. Before we move into the more advanced movements, let's talk about one movement that works your complete body.

## The Thruster

The thruster is a squat with a shoulder press. Try it with dumbbells first. Hold a dumbbell in each hand with one end of them on your shoulders. Perform a squat. As you stand up and reach that point where you have a little weightlessness, that's when you press the dumbbells overhead. Lower the dumbbells to your shoulders and repeat.



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## Advanced Weightlifting Movements

### The Deadlift

The deadlift is a relatively simple movement in function. The barbell is on the floor. You put your hands on it and stand up. Easy, right? Not quite. It's a movement that's complicated, graceful, and powerful. And it builds really strong hamstrings and glutes.



- Feet under under your shoulders and the barbell. The bar should be over your laces.
- Bend your knees and put your hands on the barbell, shoulder width apart.
- Back straight, eyes about two feet in front of you on the ground.
- Weight in your heels.
- Take a deep breath and begin to stand using the muscles in your legs. Your back and knees should raise at the same tip. Don't let your rear end come up first.
- Once the barbell is above your knees, stand up with it. Getting it to your knees is the hard part.
- Lower the barbell back the same way you stood up. Rear end back first and then lower the barbell. Your knees shouldn't really bend until the barbell is below them.

This movement is a leg and rear end movement. You shouldn't feel it in your back. You can perform the deadlift with dumbbells. Don't lower them to the ground. Keep them at about shin level. You can also perform with an empty barbell at the same height.

You can perform a "good morning," which is a deadlift movement where you don't bend your knees. Start standing. Push your rear end back, keep your knees straight, but soft. Bend forward until your back starts to curve or your hamstrings prevent you from going forward any more. You can do this without weight, with a dumbbell or with a kettlebell. You can also perform this movement with a barbell on your back.

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## Row

The row is a movement that works your back and arm muscles.

- Using your bench or a chair, place a dumbbell on each side of it.
- Place the right leg on the end of the bench, bend forward from the waist so that your upper body is parallel to the floor. Use your right hand on the bench for support.
- With your left hand, pick up the dumbbell on the floor and hold the weight. Keep your back straight.
- Pull the weight straight up to the side of your chest, keeping your upper arm close to your body. Your back shouldn't rotate during this movement. Your back is doing the work here. Only your arms should move.
- Lower the weight straight down to the starting position.
- Switch sides and repeat.

## Other movements to consider learning include:

- Snatch
- Clean and jerk
- Bench press

As you can see, there are any number of combinations that you can do in your fitness program. As you learn the movements and improve your form, you'll find yourself getting stronger quickly.

Before we wrap this up, let's explore some ideas for your weight training program and talk a little bit about nutrition.



# Creating Your Weight Training Program

## Frequency

As you begin to create your weight training program you'll want to think about how often you can lift weights and what other exercises you're going to include in your weekly workout plan.

For example, you might lift five days a week and do 20 minutes of cardio to warm up your muscles beforehand. Or you might lift three times a week and do cardio two or three times a week.



## Movements

Every day is not a day to go heavy. Once a week or so you might want to look at a one rep max (the heaviest weight you can lift one time) or you might try a three, five, or even a ten rep max. The other days are days where you lift around 50 to 60% of your max. You perform more repetitions and you focus on form.

## Notes on max effort lifts

A max effort workout always needs a really good warmup. Let's walk through an example.

Let's say that your back squat is 100 pounds. You'd warm up by performing some bodyweight squats, maybe 20, then 20 with an empty barbell (about 35 pounds) then you'd do five or so reps at 50 pounds (or 50% of your current maximum weight), then maybe 5 at 65%, 3 at 75% and then you start doing single reps starting at 80%.

Aim to do only 5 to 7 single heavy reps with the goal to get to your heaviest one rep around the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> rep. This gives you some wiggle room so that if you fail the rep, you can try again and if you make it, you might add weight and go a little heavier.

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## **Leg days and arm days**

Many fitness programs break up the weightlifting movements into legs and arms. However, you'll notice that many of the movements we talked about really do use your whole body. You can break it up this way or you can work through the movements as you see fit.

Consider simply rotating through the movements. Day one might be deadlifts, day two push jerk, day three could be overhead squat and so on. Once you get through the movements, you start the cycle over again.

## **HIIT Workouts**

You can include weightlifting in high intensity workouts. Here's an example, you might run a 400-meter sprint and then do 15 overhead squats. Repeat this four times and feel the burn. Get creative.

## **Finally, let's talk about nutrition.**

It's always a good idea to consume protein and carbs within 30 minutes of working out. Remember that any weightlifting exercise is going to create tiny tears in your muscles. They need protein to repair. A protein shake is a quick and easy way to get these nutrients into your body fast. Just look for recipes and mixes that are low in sugar.

You now have what you need to get out and start lifting. Give it a try.

Lifting weights is a lot of fun and the results in your body, your energy levels, and your strength and confidence are amazing.