

Men's Fitness

Beginner's Guide To Powerlifting

Jim Wendler and the Staff of Elite Fitness Systems

There comes a time in every lifter's life when he's asked, "whaddaya bench?" And his answer is usually one of the following: a flat-out lie ("I put up about 300"), a lame excuse ("Well, I used to do 350, but I have this injury"), or something just plain wimpy ("I don't do bench presses"). But ask me the same question and I'll tell you, in all honesty, that I can bench press 675 pounds. I can also pull 700 pounds on a deadlift. And my squat? It's 1,000 pounds and increasing. See, I'm a competitive powerlifter at Westside Barbell club in Columbus, Ohio (home of Elite Fitness Systems, elitefts.com), and putting up big numbers is my business. But you don't have to dream of becoming a powerlifter to benefit from the way I train. Powerlifting is a sport in which the objective is simply to lift as much weight as possible. You can either lift the weight or you can't—there are no excuses. Follow this workout, and even if you couldn't care less about becoming a powerlifter, I'm going to make sure that when it comes to lifting and getting fit, you never need an excuse, either. By training for maximum strength, you'll not only break plateaus and boost your max weights to numbers you'll be proud to shout to the world, you'll also build rock-hard muscle mass, blowtorch body fat, improve your overall health, and be in and out of the gym faster than ever.

GETTING STARTED

Plan to do four workouts a week: Two will focus on the bench press, and two will focus on the squat/deadlift (since many of the same muscles contribute to both lifts, it makes sense to train them both in the same session). Within those workouts, you'll further divide your training into Dynamic Effort and Maximum Effort days. On DE days, the focus will be on lifting explosively, as training your muscles to apply force to the bar rapidly will ultimately lead to strength increases. On ME days, you'll lift very heavy weights to develop maximum strength directly. While powerlifters perform three basic lifts—the squat, deadlift, and bench press—in competition, they rarely do them the same way in their training. Instead, they spend their workouts focusing on weak points—such as their ability to lock their elbows out on the bench press or begin their pull from the ground on the deadlift. This ensures that, when it's time to go all-out, there are no defects in their technique to hold them back. In this program, you'll train the same way, doing variations on those "big three," such as rack lockouts and elevated deadlifts, rather than the original exercises. Powerlifter or not, anybody can quickly gain strength and muscle with these variations.

POWER POINTS

You don't have to commit to a crazy powerlifting regimen in order to benefit from incorporating a bit of the sport into your gym routine. Here are some of the many advantages:

? INCREASED MUSCLE SIZE. Lifting heavy loads is probably the single most important training component to building muscle. Though some will argue that the amount of volume you do (the total number of reps you perform for a muscle group) is key for muscle growth, in the end, it all comes back to heavy weights. If volume were the most important variable for gaining size, every bricklayer in the country would be massive—because they all perform repetitive work with the same amount of weight day after day. Obviously, that's not the case. Rather, to induce a phenomenon called sarcomeric hypertrophy (in which the actual size of the contractile proteins in your muscle fibers increases), you need to lift heavy. Powerlifting techniques ensure that you build not only aesthetic muscular bulk but also useful, strong muscles.

? GREATER AB DEFINITION. Heavy lifting burns loads of calories and keeps your metabolism elevated for hours longer than aerobic exercise. Forget the treadmill, in fact—your metabolism slows within minutes of stepping off the racing belt.

? OVERALL IMPROVED HEALTH. Studies have shown that lifting with 10% of the force it takes to break a bone will actually help that bone grow thicker. That's why powerlifters have bones like steel cables. Experience similar gains on your own and you'll not only be stronger but also more resistant to the effects of aging, such as osteoporosis and joint problems.

Even better, powerlifting also reduces the risk of diabetes and heart disease-primarily because of its effectiveness as a stress reliever. And if that weren't enough, it also boosts self-confidence: Watching the weight you use on your best lifts increase each week gives you a tremendous sense of accomplishment. Unlike lifting to "tone" or merely "shape up," powerlifting is quantifiable you get immediate feedback from the weights.

? YOU'LL GET OUT OF THE GYM QUICKER. The volume you perform in these work-outs probably won't be as high as what you're used to. Since you'll be lifting so heavy and involving many of the muscles in your body at once, you won't need to spend time isolating the smaller ones. When you powerlift, you don't waste time on lesser exercises-you do the big ones that give you the most bang for your buck, and then you move on.