



Using Body-Weight Exercises

While free weights and machines can certainly make you stronger, don't dismiss the effectiveness of exercises that use only your own body weight. As you master your own weight, you will not only look better; you will also learn how to train three-dimensional movement, acquire a greater kinesthetic awareness and become empowered as you perform tasks with your body. Moreover, body-weight exercises make your workouts portable, an added benefit if you travel a lot or have trouble motivating yourself to go to the gym. Many of these "old school" exercises are still used as tests of muscular strength and endurance.

To make sure you do body-weight exercises correctly, use the following guidelines on body position and efficient, safe execution from Jason R. Karp, PhD, director and coach of REVO₂LT Running Team™, a freelance writer and a competitive runner.

Chin-Ups

You can build strength in your biceps, forearms and upper back by doing chin-ups, as lifting your body a vertical distance of about 2 feet is no small task. To do a chin-up correctly: grab horizontal chin-up bar or handles of jungle gym

with palms facing body and with hands shoulder width apart. From hanging position with legs straight or knees bent, pull body up until chin reaches above bar. Lower body until arms are fully extended. To do pull-ups instead of chin-ups, grab bar with palms facing away from body. If you cannot do chin-ups with your body weight, use a weight-assisted machine like the Gravitron, which uses a counterweight to reduce the amount of weight lifted.

Push-Ups

Push-ups target the pectoralis major and triceps muscles, but many people perform them incorrectly. Here's how to use proper form: kneel on floor with hands slightly less than shoulder width apart and palms on floor, legs lifted off floor, and back straight and parallel to floor. If you lack strength to do a standard push-up, you can modify this position by placing knees on floor, flexed to 90 degrees with ankles crossed. Keeping back parallel to floor, lower body down until chest touches floor. Push back up until arms are straight. Placing hands on a stability ball will also work abs.

Squats

The squat is among the most effective lower-body exercises, as it incorporates most of the leg muscles working through the kinetic chain. Stand with feet greater than shoulder width apart, contract abdominal muscles, bend knees and squat down while keeping back straight, as if you're attempting to sit in a chair, until thighs are slightly past being parallel to the floor. Straighten legs and stand up to return to the starting position. ■



Abdominal Crunches

With many people on a never-ending quest for a flat stomach or six-pack abs, exercise equipment manufacturers have created many products to help people achieve that goal. But before you reach for a piece of equipment, remember that sometimes the old-fashioned way is the best way. There has been enough research comparing abdominal muscle activity from using commercial abdominal equipment versus doing traditional crunches to conclude that crunches are just as effective or better.

To do crunches correctly, lie on back on floor, bend knees and keep feet flat on floor. Place hands behind head, elbows out to sides. Contract abdominal muscles and lift shoulder blades and upper back off floor. Do not raise middle and low back. Slowly lower head, neck and shoulders to floor. In addition to traditional crunches, you can use variations. Try twist crunches (twisting to one side while lifting torso) or reverse crunches (raising legs and buttocks instead of torso).

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