

Putting Female Weight Room Fears to Rest

By Jeffrey S. Harrison, CSCS, NSCA-CPT, ACE-CES

Today, the weight room of any health club is a far cry from the early days of bodybuilding. It generally still remains a secluded room where the sounds of iron "clacking" and grunting and groaning begin and echo throughout the building. The basics are all still there: barbells, dumbbells, benches, racks, mirrors, etc., but thanks to advances in strength training technology, strength training equipment has become more streamlined and efficient making weight rooms look more like fancy jungle gyms. The most notable change in the weight room however, has been its occupants. Until about two decades ago, very few women ever gave any thought to weight training, let alone actually enter the weight room. Today, women of all ages are hitting the weights, almost as often as their male counterparts. Unfortunately, too many women still find the weight room daunting and intimidating, and for those reasons, fail to seek the benefits that a good weight training program can provide. Most still base their decision on gym lore or myth - the myth that lifting weights will make them look manly or less feminine.

The good news for females who engage or are interested in weight training is that lifting weights will NOT make them look more masculine or bulk them up despite any preconceived fears they may have. On the flip side, the bad news is that as a regular or novice exerciser seeking to change the shape of her body (i.e. lose body fat) and who does not include some type of weight training into her routine, she will find herself very disappointed and frustrated. Rest assured, weight training will do more to slim a female down and tone her up than it will to bulk her up. Understanding why this is so will go a long way in changing a female's attitude towards weight training.

First and foremost, physiologically, female muscle has the exact same characteristics as male muscle and therefore will respond the same way to training. Increases in muscle size, or hypertrophy, are attributed to changes at the molecular level as a result of external resistance (weights). There are numerous factors that play a role in determining the amount of change that takes place in the muscle, such as the amount of weight lifted, the number of sets, reps, etc. However, in regards to the differences between the sexes for muscular development, the primary factor is the hormone testosterone. Men and women both produce the hormones testosterone and estrogen. Men have a higher ratio

of testosterone to estrogen and women have a higher ratio of estrogen to testosterone. At rest, men have as much as ten times the amount of testosterone that women do. There are some females however that have higher than normal levels of testosterone and will show signs of increased muscular girth as a result of weight training, just as there are males who produce higher levels of estrogen than normal. The point here is that these scenarios are very rarely the case and the majority of females can lift weights their entire lives and never look like Arnold.

These preconceived fears have led many women to either sell themselves short or shy away from weight training altogether. A perfect example of this is the woman who stands in front of the mirror spending endless hours curling three-pound dumbbells or sets the leg press to fifty pounds. She is under the misguided assumption that the lighter weights accompanied by higher reps is going to tone up and tighten



her muscles. Well, if time is not an issue and quick change is not a priority, then at least there will be an extremely low incidence of injury. The truth is, a muscle will only change (i.e. tone, strengthen, etc.) if the stimulus (the amount of weight, or resistance lifted) is varied and yes, even increased. Research has shown that increases in female muscle strength is generally accompanied by only small increases in muscle mass and either decreases in or constant total body weight. Furthermore, since muscle is metabolic living tissue, building quality, lean muscle is the only way any of us can naturally increase our metabolism. If a woman is trying to change the shape of her body, then that should be music to her ears. Adding quality, strong, and functional muscle to a female body not only looks good, but also turns her into a perennial fat furnace. The calorie burning effect that weight training has on muscle is sustained three to four times longer than an equivalent amount of time spent performing cardiovascular exercise.

There are some other factors that women beginning a weight training program should also be aware of if they have not already experienced it first hand. The first is that females generally store more intramuscular fat (fat stored within the muscle itself) than males do. This phenomenon is common among those who think the StairMaster increased the size of their buttocks or will not participate in a Spin class because they are afraid it will make their legs bigger. Lifting weights can have that same effect but it is not so much that the girth of the muscles is increasing but that the fat within the muscle is expanding due to the training effect of the muscle itself. Solution to the problem: do not stop performing those exercises and be serious about dietary intake. The second is that the weight training program should be built around compound, multi-joint movements (such as a squat) and not isolatory movements (such as bicep curls). While both can be a part of a solid program, the real benefit from weight training for women comes from being able to load the entire skeleton and stimulate not only the large calorie burning muscle groups, but the larger bones of the body as well to protect against osteoporosis.

Always seek the help of a certified fitness professional to set up a program, demonstrate the exercises, or have around specifically for the weight training exercises only. The body will give back exactly what is put into it and the results will be absolutely stunning.



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