

Dispelling Myths and Misconceptions: Women and Weight Training

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Women, it is time that Unalaska catches up with the rest of the progressive American Society. Optimistically, I walk into the weight room at the PCR time after time looking for women lifting weights, and repetitively I see only MEN in there. Our culture has traditionally viewed strength and muscles as masculine traits and because of this, myths and misconceptions have been taught to young girls and women to discourage their participation in weight training. Some of these beliefs include such notions as “weight training will make women big, muscular, and highly defined” or “muscular strength is only important for males in our society.” Some other fallacies I’ve heard in the past include believing that lifting weights has no real health benefits, or even further - that women who lift weights will actually increase their potential of getting injured.

The good news: Education and awareness about the benefits of women strength training is gradually dispelling these myths and misconceptions throughout mainstream America and research is showing that women are becoming not only physically stronger, but also mentally and emotionally healthier. Gyms around the Nation are creating environments comfortable for women to engage in strength training programs by providing personal trainers, group classes, or “gym times for women.”

First and foremost, I will try to dispel some common myths I hear all too often. To begin, research shows that only 1 out of 10,000 females has the genetic endowment to develop large, defined musculature, and even in that case, in order to develop such musculature, the woman must engage in an advanced bodybuilding program and extreme diet regimen. To me that is unfortunate - I wish more women had the genetic potential to look more defined - but nevertheless, it is the truth. In contrast, most women think that they could never be as strong as a man and therefore restrict themselves to using only light weights. Actually, on the basis of lean body mass (muscles, bones, organs), many women are capable of proportionally becoming as strong as many men. In research studies including both men and women who have the same amount of weight training history and proportionally the same amount of lean body mass, this idea unequivocally true.

Second, do you really believe that muscular strength is only important for males in our society? Why? What do “men” do that women don’t do these days? Women engage in all sorts of very physically demanding occupations, active hobbies and interests, and contact sports. In addition, generally women who are strong raise more confident children, aren’t victims of domestic violence, and have improved self-esteem and confidence.

Third, in this day in age most people know that exercising 3-4 times a week for 30 minutes or more is recommended for a healthy body. Unfortunately, even women who engage in some type of exercise on a daily basis do not include lifting weights as part of their exercise routine. Why? Do you remember who told you to go and exercise but don’t lift weights? Strength training is just as beneficial as aerobic training. Specifically, strength training increases bone strength and reduces the risk of osteoporosis, creates stronger connective tissues to increase joint stability and help prevent injury, increases functional strength for sports and daily activities, and increases lean body mass and decreases body fat by raising metabolic rate.

Lastly, I can understand how some women feel that they will get hurt if they lift weights, especially if they have never been instructed on proper lifting techniques and mechanics. I feel this is the greatest barrier of them all. Generally, I have found that men showing women how to lift free weights is at best a nice gesture that does not address a woman's specific needs. I don't at all want to discourage the initiation of a strength training program if free weights are all you have available. I'm just stating that in my history of Olympic weight lifting and college sports, I've seen it all. There is no doubt that women's bodies are unique, their mechanics and body angles are different from men's, the body parts important to them are different, the motivational techniques women respond to are different, and the feeling of inferiority because of strength differences automatically put women's confidence and self-worth below par from the start.

Because of this, at the initiation of any weight-training program, weight machines are usually the way to go for women. They can help decrease injury, increase proper lifting mechanics, and control the speed of the weights. Then you can progress from there to free weights when you feel comfortable.

Women, educate yourselves! Get a book, research the internet, talk to a friend, get a personal trainer, just go in the weight room and look around, sit on the machines, start with the light weights at first, do something!!!! Believe that strength training is not complicated, believe that strength training is empowering and energizing, try all attempts to get over the barriers, and don't believe the myths and misconceptions. Women of Unalaska, GET STRONG!