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# Dumbbells are a smart choice

■ **MATT BRZYCKI**

Believe it or not, there was a time when the fitness world wasn't dominated by high-tech equipment as it is today. Years ago, the barbell was the equipment of choice for most strength and fitness enthusiasts – much as it is today. But even before the barbell came the dumbbell, a distinct device of early exercise that held a lofty place as one of the original pieces of equipment for developing muscle and might.



**Matt Brzycki**

## ADVANTAGES OF DUMBBELLS

There are many important advantages of using dumbbells. Let's take a glimpse at a few of them.

### Independent Workload

A major advantage of using dumbbells is that it forces each of your limbs to work independently of the other. Most individuals are stronger (and more flexible) on one side of their body than the other side. Usually, this isn't a significant difference. But when there's a gross difference in the strength between limbs, the use of dumbbells is highly recommended. This is also an important consideration for rehabilitative strength training. In this case, an individual may even have to work one limb at a time while using a lighter weight for the weaker limb.

### Relative Safety

Another big plus of dumbbells is that they allow you to train alone in a reasonably safe manner. Here's a perfect example: When performing a bench press with a barbell, you should get a "spot" from a competent spotter or training partner or use a safety rack. Doing so reduces the potential for an unexpected mishap such as losing your grip or being trapped under the weighted bar.

With dumbbells, you cannot get "stuck" since you can simply lower the weights to the floor thereby avoiding the possibility of serious injury. And speak-

ing of the bench press – or any of its variants for that matter such as the incline press and decline press – doing the exercise to muscular fatigue with a barbell requires the presence of a competent spotter. But with dumbbells, you can train confidently and safely to muscular fatigue without that requirement.

### Added Variety

Yet another advantage of using dumbbells is that they can provide variety to your workouts. Remember, every exercise that can be performed with a barbell can also be performed with dumbbells. For the most part, dumbbells can be incorporated into your workouts as easily as barbells and, in certain cases, make for a better alternative. For example, you can do the bent-over row with a barbell using both arms at the same time but this puts your lower back in a precarious position. It's much better to do the bent-over row with one arm at a time using the non-exercising arm for support to stabilize your torso and, thus, your lower back.

Also keep in mind that there are quite a few exercises that you can do with dumbbells but not with a barbell. Several other exercises can be performed with a barbell but they're less awkward to do with dumbbells.

### Hand/Grip Positions

Dumbbells give you the unrestricted freedom to change the position of your hands to best suit your natural mechanics and comfort level. So you can do a bicep curl with dumbbells using a traditional grip (with your palms facing up), a "parallel grip" (with your palms facing each other), a reverse grip (with your palms facing down) or even a grip that's some-

where in between.

This may be an important consideration for some people, especially those who experience joint pain during certain exercises. Many times, there's less orthopedic stress when you opt for a different hand position. Suppose that you have slight pain or discomfort in your shoulder when doing the bench press with a barbell. Regardless of the reason why, it's quite possible that simply changing the position of your hands from that used with a barbell to a parallel grip with dumbbells will allow you to perform the exercise in a relatively pain-free manner.

Besides the bench press, there are many other exercises in which this tactic can offer orthopedic relief for the shoulder joint. This includes the incline press, decline press, bent-over row, bench row, seated press, shoulder shrug and deadlift.

### RESOURCE

A handy resource is the book *Dumbbell Training for Strength and Fitness*. It includes descriptions of nearly 50 exercises that can be performed with dumbbells along with more than three dozen workouts that were submitted by approximately

24 strength and fitness professional from across the country.

### THE BOTTOM LINE

When used properly, safely, intensely and infrequently, dumbbells can be extremely effective and efficient. Clearly, dumbbells are a smart choice.

*Matt Brzycki is the Assistant Director of Campus Recreation, Fitness at Princeton University. A former Marine Drill Instructor, he has authored, co-authored or edited 16 books on strength and fitness, including SWAT Fitness (available at [www.optacinternational.com](http://www.optacinternational.com)).*

