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EXERCISE PRESCRIPTION

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## A Grip Tip

By Matt Brzycki



**A** powerful grip is a sign of a powerful individual. On the wrestling mat, your grip strength is extremely critical in controlling your opponent; in the weight room, your grip strength is also important since it is used in many multiple-joint movements that target your upper torso. Remember, too, that grip strength is not limited to athletic endeavors - an abundance of everyday activities also involve gripping.

So the importance of having a strong grip is well established. Of the muscles that are involved directly with gripping, the ones that receive the least amount of attention are those that flex your fingers. Also consider this: A study in the February 2002 issue of *Biomechanics* determined that the four fingers do not produce equal amounts of gripping force. This informa-

tion, in itself, is really no great surprise to the wrestling community. But what is of interest is that the study quantified the force production of the four fingers. It was found that the force-sharing percentages of your fingers (at an optimal angle of your wrist) are as follows: index 32.2%, middle 32.6%, ring 23.5% and little 11.7%. So of the total force in gripping, roughly one third is produced by the index finger, one third by the middle finger and one third by the collective efforts of the ring and little fingers. The implication of this information is that you should address the two fingers that contribute the least amount of gripping force - namely your ring and little fingers - to strengthen the weak link.

### EXERCISES

Needless to say, relatively few people do any direct work for their finger flexors . . . and even less do any direct work to isolate their ring and little fingers. Yet, the importance of strengthening these muscles cannot be overstated. Therefore, it is a good idea to target these muscles on a regular basis.

While it is difficult to provide direct work for the ring and little fingers, it is not impossible. One effective exercise that can be slightly modified to isolate and strengthen these two fingers is finger flexion. You can do this movement by utilizing a low pulley with a short bar attached to a cable. Simply stand up, keep your arms straight and grasp the ends of the bar using only your ring and little fingers. To do the exercise, pull the bar to the mid-range position (fingers flexed) without using your arms or other body parts - just your ring and little fingers. Pause briefly in this position - while squeezing the bar as hard as possible - and then lower the bar under control to the starting position (fingers extended) at the end of each repetition to provide an adequate stretch. Attempt to lower the bar all the way down to your fingertips - to the point where the bar almost drops from your two fingers. Do not throw the weight by using your legs or by swinging your upper torso back and forth - movement should only occur around your finger joints. Besides using a low pulley with a short bar attachment, you can also

do this exercise in a similar fashion using manual resistance.

### ACTIVITIES

You can also perform a few activities to strengthen your ring and little fingers. An excellent activity is to squeeze a ball using just these two fingers. This activity has its shortcomings in that the resistance is somewhat limited. Nevertheless, it makes for a great way to isolate your ring and little fingers. Using only these two fingers, you can either squeeze a rubber ball as hard as possible for 60 seconds or do 60 seconds worth of slow, deliberate repetitions. Either way, the idea is to isolate your ring and little fingers.

Another activity that can be used to improve the strength of your ring and little fingers is to pop bubble wrap. This unusual activity involves the use of bubble wrap that is often found in shipping packages. Simply take a section of the bubble wrap and pop each of the bubbles by pressing the tips of your ring and little fingers to your palms. Do not press with your thumbs or other fingers - just your ring and little fingers.

### GET A GRIP!

By doing direct work for the muscles that affect your fingers, you will increase your grip strength. Clearly, improving the strength of your gripping muscles can turn a weak link into a strong suit.

Matt Brzycki has been involved in the strength and conditioning of collegiate wrestlers for more than 20 years. Since 1986, he has authored more than 60 articles for *Wrestling USA Magazine*. Reprints of 42 of these articles have been updated and adapted into book form (*Wrestling Strength: The Competitive Edge* and *Wrestling Strength: Prepare to Win*) and are available through Cardinal Publishers Group (317-879-0871). He is also the author of *A Practical Approach to Strength Training* and the editor of *Maximize Your Training*, a 455-page book that features chapters written by more than 30 strength and fitness professionals. 🐾

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