

Free Weights vs Machines- Which Are Better?

An important thing to factor in if you design your own exercise programme is how much time to devote to resistance machine training over free weights. There are pros and cons to both and it is important for you to understand the differences to know if your workout is effective or not. In the majority of cases I always consider free weights to be more useful than machines. Fixed-path machines are usually aimed at the beginner because you need little supervision when using them. This is why your average gym is crammed full of them even though there are more effective variations. For example, bench press machines don't require a spotter when you go to failure but a barbell bench press would. If all gyms used free weights they would need more supervision from instructors and also need more advice given to their customers to ensure they used the equipment safely.

- Free weights promote joint health. Each repetition is going to use a slightly different path to the one before it which reduces repetitive stress on the same part of the joint.
- Machines cannot physically fit everyone who uses them. A shoulder press machine cannot fit a male bodybuilder with wide shoulders and a slim pilates instructor with narrow shoulders. At least one of these people is going to be pushing in a compromised trajectory.
- Free weights are more versatile. Think of how many exercises you can do with a dumbbell. Now how many exercises can you do with a leg extension machine? There is a huge difference. Ideally any gym I train in would be extremely free weight dominant.
- Machines can provide stress on muscle groups that can be hard to hit with free weights. For example, when you train the hamstrings during leg curl (knee flexion) exercises, it is extremely hard to provide enough stress over the entire range using a dumbbell or cable. It is possible to use them to make one part of the movement very hard but the rest of the movement will be far too easy. This is because when the knee bends the foot will be moving in a quarter circle around that anchor. It is next to impossible to replicate this using a cable machine. In this circumstance machines are much more useful.
- Free weights train more than just the muscles moving. The standing barbell shoulder press is going to work your whole body to some degree. Your core is going to be firing just by holding you in position, your legs are going to be tensed doing the same thing. The stabilisers of the shoulder are going to be working to ensure you are pushing it in a suitable line and keeping the bar balanced. If you are sitting on a shoulder press machine how many of these are going to be working? The difference is huge and therefore the overall calorie expense of the free weight version will be greater.
- Machines can be used when you are training without a spotter. If you want to really push yourself to the point of failure on an exercise without having someone with you. A machine can serve its place here.
- You can use machines for convenient drop sets. Should you want to go to failure repeatedly it is very easy to lower the weight stack so you can perform an extended set. This can be more difficult on some free weight exercises.

These are a few examples which help explain the issue. One thing that is important to point out is that machines should not be used as substitutes just because you don't know the free weight version of the exercise. In a lot of cases they are going to give inferior results, end of. If you are doing a lot of machines because you are new to the

gym ask a qualified professional to write you a programme and demonstrate the exercises- your physique will change much faster this way.

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