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**Free Weights vs. Exercise Machines**

**By Aaron M. Potts**

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Anyone who has ever been in a gym before is familiar with the gleaming banks of shiny exercise machines. Coming in all shapes and sizes, they are usually cause for the newcomer to the gym to pause and ask, "What IS all of that stuff?"

Well, according to the price that the gym paid for any one piece of that equipment, I certainly hope that it not only stimulates your muscles, but also cooks your breakfast, washes your car, and brings the kids home from soccer practice! Now the question becomes whether or not those machines were worth the price, or if you'd be better off doing a home aerobics video with a can of soup in each hand....

Personally, I would advise you to get the low-sodium version of the soup, serve it up alongside a tomato sandwich, and then go buy yourself some free weights. Yes, that is just my opinion, but it does come with some scientific reasoning behind it.

**Natural movement vs. Controlled movement**

One of the things that you need to remember is that when you are exercising, you are training for LIFE. You may spend an hour a day at the gym, but that still leaves 23 other hours for your muscles to function without the aid of that fancy equipment.

Whenever you do any given exercise, the movement of your body during that exercise is called the Range of Motion. The greater and more difficult the Range of Motion, the more effective the exercise is, because your body has to work harder to perform that movement.

Let's take a classic dumbbell bicep curl for our case study. If you aren't familiar with the movement, it is basically performed by standing up straight with your palms facing forward, and a pair of dumbbells held down at your sides. You concentrically contract your biceps (also known as flexing your elbow) to bring the dumbbells up to approximately shoulder level, and then repeat the movement for a prescribed

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number of repetitions.

Let's take that same muscle movement and do it using a bicep curl machine. You sit down, brace your upper arms on a pad, grasp 2 handles that are in front of you, and do that same fancy elbow flexing movement to move the handles in an upward motion. Pretty easy stuff so far, right?

Now let's examine the muscles that are used in this motion. Wait - I thought we were concentrically contracting the biceps? That is correct, and if you are using the bicep curl machine, that is pretty much ALL you are doing. For one, you are sitting down. You know, like you did all day at work, and then in your car on the way to the gym. Then, your upper arms are braced on a nice soft pad to keep your upper body stable while you pull the handles upwards. The machine has effectively limited the muscles used in this exercise to the biceps, as well as the muscles in your forearms and fingers as you grip the handles.

Let us now sidestep over to the weight room where the dumbbells are kept, and once again get in the start position for a standing bicep curl with the dumbbells. Notice the term "standing". You know, like you DIDN'T do all day at work, and hopefully also did not do in your car on the way to the gym. So before we even start the exercise, we are using more muscles than we did on the machine - namely the leg muscles.

Now let's pick up a 10 lb dumbbell in each hand. We've just added 20 lbs to our body weight. What is keeping us from losing our center of balance and falling clean over? The abdominal muscles and the muscles of the lower back and spine. Now we are using our legs, our abs, and our back. Flex those elbows and start to raise the dumbbells. Now our center of gravity has become a fluid state, and our legs, back, and abs all have to constantly compensate to maintain posture. Oh, and the biceps are also in on the action by this point, as are the forearms, the fingers, and the shoulder girdle.

We now have the dumbbells all the way up and it's time to start lowering them again, via an eccentric contraction of the biceps (also know as extending the elbow). What muscle group controls the extension of the elbow? The triceps on the back of the arm.

Did you lose track yet? It's okay if you did because you have illustrated the point:

Machine Bicep Curl: Uses the biceps, forearms, and fingers

Cost: Thousands of dollars

Standing Dumbbell Bicep Curl: Uses the biceps, forearms, fingers, legs, abs, back, triceps, and shoulders.

Cost: \$40 for a good set of dumbbells that can be used for dozens of other exercises

In a nutshell, free weight exercises simply USE MORE MUSCLES than machines do, which make them more effective. Does that mean that the machines are a complete waste? Absolutely not! In some circumstances it is BETTER to stabilize the muscles being used in any given movement. However,

those circumstances are the exception, rather than the rule.

So what do you do? Change up your routine, and incorporate free weights as well as machine exercises. However, keep the machine work to a minimum - say 20% of your total time spent working with weights. Spend the other 80% developing your stabilizer muscles, your sense of balance and coordination, and if nothing else - just standing up!

After all, you can go home and sit down on the couch to enjoy your post-workout snack. The bicep machine already brought the kids home from soccer practice, remember?

Aaron Potts is the owner and operator of Aaron's Personal Training in Orange Park, FL. Aaron's experience in the health and fitness industry includes one on one personal training in client's homes and local gyms, as well as outdoor training programs. Aaron's company also offers local and long distance fitness consulting, as well as an online personal training program.

### **6 Advantages of Free Weights Over Exercise Machines**

**By Jon Gestl**

Meet Sarah.

About a year ago, Sarah saw an infomercial about a "multi-unit" workout machine. The announcer called it a "revolutionary" piece of equipment, claiming that people would see results in "just 2-4 weeks". It exercised all major body parts and the female model shown using the machine said it "was safer and more effective than free weights."

Intimidated by gyms her whole life, Sarah knew having her own home gym would be the key to her finally getting into shape. She had heard that machines were safer than free weights. Besides, the machine came with "easy to follow video instructions". The price was steep, but as Sarah imagined changing her body, she got her credit card and grabbed the phone.

On the day of delivery, Sarah was surprised to see it took up twice the space she was told it would, limiting space in her already cramped den. Excited to get started, she popped in the video, and hopped on the machine. Sarah soon found that she, at 5'3", was too small to fit on the machine for some of the exercises. She continued on anyway, trying to ignore the fact that her lower back and knees were starting to hurt a little.

Sarah used her new revolutionary machine exactly three more times. For the last six months, it has been her unofficial clothes hanger.

What happened? Sarah thought she was buying a machine that would be very easy to operate and be a safe alternative to free-weights. Unfortunately, Sarah and many others are misguided by heavily marketed hype by machine developers. When it comes to effectiveness, particularly for the beginning exerciser, free-weights (i.e., dumbbells) rate much higher than expensive machines in terms of:

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1. Cost. Three or four sets of dumbbells would have cost Sarah less than 10 times the amount she spent on her machine. As she gets stronger, she would have to buy more, though even a full set would not set her back nearly as much as the machine did.
2. Space. Dumbbells take up far less space than most of the exercise equipment sold on infomercials. You can easily place them in a closet, out of sight under the bed, or in a corner. There are even dumbbells you can adjust (i.e., PowerBlock) that allow you to adjust the poundage on one set, eliminating the need for single-poundage dumbbells.
3. Variety. Most machines are designed as one-dimensional. Even the most extensive multi-unit machines will allow exercisers to perform only a limited number of movements in a restricted range of motion. Free-weights can be used in ranges of motion based on the exerciser, not a machine. Use free weights along with benches or Swiss Balls and you have multitude of exercise options.
4. Suitability. Sarah couldn't use her "multi-usage" machine for certain exercises because the machine was too big. This is not an uncommon problem. Even though most machines have adjustable seats, arm pads, and lever arms, there are limitations to their range and some may not fit the very small or very large person. However, if you can grab a dumbbell, you can use it.
5. Functionality. Exercising with free-weights increases the likelihood that the effects of the exercise will cross over into real-world situations. Think about it. How often during the day do you lie in a diagonal supine position and push weight up like you would on a machine leg press? Probably never. But how often are you required to do activities that are biomechanically identical to the squat? Sitting, getting in and out of a car, crouching down to pick something up...all the time! Properly using free weights will increase the functionality of an exercise to real-world situations.
6. Safety. It seems counterintuitive to consider free-weights as safer than machines. Most of us have heard (somewhere..) that we could get hurt with dumbbells and that machines were "safer." Maybe just the idea of someone doing a huge bench press lends itself to imagining the likelihood that one might lose control of the same amount of weight if they ever attempted it.

Safety during exercise is more about proper form, technique, concentration and control rather than exercise apparatus. Someone can get hurt on a machine just as easily as with a dumbbell if incorrect form is used. As always, if you don't know how to do something, find someone (i.e., a reputable trainer) to show you how.

Safety as a result of exercise is a long-term issue. It is not necessary for the body to stabilize itself or the weight during movements on most machines, because the weight apparatus is fixed. Key stabilizer muscles are then never given the chance to get stronger. Free-weights allow the exerciser to utilize core muscles and allow multi-plane movement that forces the exerciser to strengthen stabilizer musculature, which support joints. Over the long-term, free weights are superior to machines for building a stronger, more functional body.

You don't need to spend a fortune on a piece of exercise equipment that you'll never end up using and

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won't suit your needs. A few sets of dumbbells are effective, intelligent alternatives to buying equipment, especially for those setting up their own in-home gym or workout area.

Jon Gestl, CSCS, is a personal fitness trainer and instructor in Chicago specializing in in-home and in-office fitness training. He is a United States National Aerobic Champion silver and bronze medalist and world-ranked sportaerobic competitor. He can be contacted through his website at

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