



8 Ways to Increase Your Strength and Muscle Mass

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If you want to improve your strength and add muscle mass then the following tips will help you shake up your program and give your results a boost.

Lift Heavy, Lift Often

If you want to get strong you'll need to lift heavy! Heavy means weights that you can only lift for 1-5 reps with at least a 2 minute break between sets. Far too many people in gyms these days are wasting their time pumping away with moderate weights. Many people will tell you that 3 sets of 8-12 reps is required to build muscle but they fail to tell you that it won't make you very strong and surely that's the whole point of lifting.

What good is it to look good and then be useless when you need strength?

A quick survey of top weightlifters, track and field athletes and other explosive athletes reveals that not only do they look good but they are extremely strong. Dig a little deeper and you find out they got that way by training heavy.

If you are going to train heavy then you'll also want to lift several times a week. Just like languages, cooking or your job you get better at things by doing them a lot. Squat once a week and unless you are crippling yourself with massive loads and volumes you'll end up with tooth pick legs.

So load up the bar and hit the big weights 4-6 days a week!

Simplify

Many of the greatest athletes in the world have achieved world record success on very simple programs. Eliminate complexity from your program and focus on mastering the fundamentals.

For a start you can forget silly isolation exercises like tricep kickbacks and leg extensions. Find out what are the most effective and fundamental exercises in your sport or training and work them hard, heavy and often. Try working on the following exercises only for the next 3 months.

Squats, deadlifts, explosive pulls and swings, bench press, military press, pull-ups, snatch, clean and jerk.

Cut the useless fluff from your program and work those exercises hard and I can virtually guarantee that you'll pack on some serious size and strength.

Intensify

The key to results with any fitness program is to choose the appropriate intensity for each workout and for the program overall. In my experience only a small percentage of people understand what they are capable of and the majority of trainees are training well below their capacity and yet think they are working hard.

If you want real results then it's time to accept that you may have been slacking and go find a coach who can give you an honest appraisal of where you stand.

Once you've got someone to watch your back it's time to kick up the intensity of your program. Test your 1 rep max in the squat, deadlift and upper body presses and then get down to some serious 85-95 % work.

For a definition of intensity look up the Smolov Squat program and follow it for three weeks, I did and it added 15kg to my squat and 3kg to legs and back.

Sometimes you've got to train so hard that it leaves you lying on the floor gasping for breath and wishing that you could just crawl out of the gym un-noticed. You shouldn't train this way every day but if you don't train hard once in a while you'll never achieve your full potential.

Explosive pulls

One of the big secrets to increasing strength and muscle mass is explosive pulling movements such as the clean pull, snatches and swings. Repeated explosive pulls with heavy weights will strengthen your entire posterior chain from traps to calves and will pack on kilos of muscle.

Explosive pulls have fantastic carryover to sports, combat and many jobs. Try adding 5 sets of 5 reps of snatch or clean pulls to the end of your leg workouts. Use about 60% of your best squat for snatch pulls or 75% of your best squat for clean pulls.

Alternately do some heavy dumbbell or kettlebell swings at the end of each workout.

Build up and then back off

Heavy, hard training is important and so is progression by adding weight or volume. Unfortunately you will not be able to continually increase your load and volume without becoming seriously overtrained and possibly injured.

I suggest that you work progressively harder for three weeks with the aim of achieving a new personal best in a certain lift such as the squat, deadlift or clean. Once you have built up to the new PB it is time to back off for a week and reduce the load to about 75% of your best and the volume to 50%. After a relatively light week it is time to set a new PB goal and attack it with determination for another 3 week cycle.

This type of training will keep you relatively fresh and over the year will lead to consistent gains in strength and muscle mass.

Specialise and volumise!

Inevitably after a few months of hard training you will discover strengths and weaknesses in your physique and abilities. When you reach this point it's time to specialise for a few weeks and add extra volume to break through the plateau.

For example if your legs are lagging behind your upper body (common in these days of too many bench presses and bicep curls) then it's time to do some heavy high rep squatting like 20 rep squats or the Smolov routine.

If your back is small and weak because again you've spent too much time on the mirror muscle of your chest and arms then it's time for a pullup program and heavy deadlifts.

Specialise for three weeks, train very hard and then switch programs. Try tripling the volume of work for your weakest areas for the three weeks and see what happens!

Eat and Grow.

The three pillars of a successful strength and hypertrophy plan are hard work, adequate recovery and good nutrition!

While I'm intrigued by the relentless research that is going on in sports supplements I firmly believe that unless you are at an elite (and I mean state/national level) level of sports performance the majority of hi tech supplements are a waste of money and most people would be better served by training harder and sticking to a basic nutrition plan with minimal supplements.

For muscle mass and strength I suggest protein from lean meats, eggs, dairy and fish, carbs from vegetables, fruits and grains but with limited refined carbs including white flour, white rice and sugar. Get your fats from nuts, seeds, olive oil and fish oil.

While many sources advocate high carbs, low carbs, high protein, low fat or high fat my advice is to achieve a balance of all three macronutrients and then focus on the following basic eating rules.

For muscle mass

- Eat a lot and eat often
- Keep all your meals balanced with some protein, some good fats and some carbs.
- Expect to gain a little bit of fat when adding muscle but don't use this as an excuse to eat junk food
- Eat your veges and fruits
- As much as possible eat unprocessed foods, if it comes in a plastic baggie chances are someone's been screwing with it.

For strength

- Same as above, just watch the amount of food you eat.

Supplements

Once you have a good base of nutrition it's time to add a few choice supplements

- Whey Protein – nothing fancy just straight whey protein concentrate.
- Multivitamin – just to cover your bases
- Fish oil – particularly if you don't eat fish

Diet shouldn't be complex and your kitchen shouldn't look like a meth lab with 400 different bottles with names like "Testo Grow Plus" and "Mega Cut 2000"

Fatigue has many flavours

Above I mentioned that one of the keys to strength and mass was training hard. If your aim is muscle mass then that should be changed slightly. The key to

muscle mass increase is to fatigue the muscle with a relatively high volume of work and then allow time and nutrients to allow the muscle to grow back bigger.

Traditionally this has led bodybuilders to use lots of forced reps, supersets, drop sets and the like however there are other set and rep schemes that are just as effective for building mass while also increasing strength.

Try the following rep/set schemes for variety.

Using big compound exercises like squats, deadlifts, military presses, pull-ups and bench press.

A set of 5 reps with 90% of your max followed by 10 sets of 5 at 80%

100 singles at 85-90% max in one hour.

Ladders at 80% of max. 1 rep, 2 reps, 3 reps etc until you get to a number you can only just do. The drop back and start again.

For more a personalised strength and conditioning plan to help you achieve your goals email

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