

# Free Weights or Machines?

## Which should you choose for the best workout?

Strength training can be confusing if you're just starting out or if it's been awhile since you've lifted weights, especially when it comes to choosing what type of equipment to use. Should you use free weights or machines? Knowing the pros and cons of each can help you figure out which one is right for you.

### The Pros and Cons of Weight Machines

Weight machines can be a good choice, especially if you're just getting started with strength training. In fact, many beginners start out using machines because:

- **They're supportive.** Most machines provide support, which is great for people who need help when learning new exercises. It can also be good for people rehabbing injuries or those who want to lift heavy weights without a spotter.
- **They're easy to use.** Because most machines work on a fixed path and have instructions and diagrams posted, it's easier to use good form.
- **They save time.** It usually doesn't take as much time to change weights on machines as it would for many free weight exercises.
- **They're less intimidating.** Trying to figure out what to do with a bunch of dumbbells can seem impossible. With machines, you know exactly what muscles you're working and how to do the exercise correctly.

On the other hand, machines do have disadvantages such as:

- **They're too supportive.** Because you have so much support, you use fewer muscle groups at the same time. This means you burn less calories and work the body in a less functional way.
- **They're limited.** Most machines offer one exercise for one part of the body, which means having to use multiple machines for a total body workout.
- **They don't allow you to work on weaknesses.** Many machines require you to use both arms or legs to move the weight, so if one side is stronger than the other, that side may do more work than the weaker side.
- **They don't allow the body to work naturally.** Because many machines work on a fixed path, there's not much room for working the body throughout different planes of motion.

Of course, not all weight machines are created equally and many gyms now offer a variety of machines including plate-loaded, free motion and cable machines which can offer more variety and more functional training. These types of machines often have a higher learning curve and require more skill and coordination than the average machine.

## The Pros and Cons of Free Weights

Free weights are probably my favorite way to strength train because they offer effective, time-efficient workouts. Other advantages include:

- **Versatility.** Free weights can be used for a variety of exercises for the entire body, so you don't have to move from machine to machine to work different muscle groups.
- **Functionality.** With free weights, you're able to move the body through natural motions as well as through a variety of planes allowing you to mimic movements you do in real life like squatting, lifting things over your head and rotating the body.
- **Building whole body strength.** Because you're supporting your own body, you can work on specific muscles while involving smaller stabilizer muscles that can get neglected with machine training...this can also help you burn more calories during your workout.

Like machines, free weights also have some disadvantages:

- **They're hard to learn.** Using free weights requires skill and coordination, so you may need some instruction when using them for the first time. Good form is harder to achieve without the added support from machines, so there's a higher learning curve with free weights.
- **Risk of injury.** Because there isn't a fixed path when using free weights, it's easier to put your body in the wrong position, which could lead to injury. There's also the risk of dropping the weights, especially if you're lifting heavy.
- **Confusion.** With machines, you know exactly what exercise you're doing and what muscle you're working. With dumbbells, there are so many exercises you can do, it's easy to get confused about where to start.

With strength training, a variety of tools is often the best way to get an effective workout. When choosing your own resistance, consider the following:

1. If you're a **beginner:** stick with machines until you feel more comfortable with the movements.
2. If you're **in a hurry:** go with machines. Workouts are generally more time-efficient when machines are used. If you have to wait in line, however, choose free weights.
3. If you're **working out at home:** stick with free weights. Machines are expensive, take up a lot of room and offer limited exercises. Free weights are cheaper, versatile and take up less room.
4. If you're **rehabbing an injury:** stick with machines since they offer the most support, but always follow your doctor/physical therapist's advice.
5. If you **hate lifting weight:** you might find machines are easiest to use.
6. To **get the most out of each workout in the fastest possible time:** stick with free weights. You can incorporate more muscle groups at the same time.