

Weight Lifting 101

I'd heard rumors about it before I ever left for college, and once I moved into the dorm, I realized it was not just a rumor. I needed a way to combat the "Freshman Fifteen," that dreaded poundage resulting from a combination of late-night pizzas, care-package cookies, and cafeteria cheesecakes. So, my roommate and I headed to the university gym where the weight-training rooms are filled with student "chain gangs" sweating and clanging their way through a series of mechanical monsters. As I looked around, it became obvious that people work out for quite different reasons. Health enthusiasts, toning or defining devotees, athletes, and body builders seem to be the main categories of those lifting weights.

Some students lift weights as part of an exercise program aimed at maintaining or improving health. They've heard about strong abdominals reducing lower-back problems. They've learned that improved flexibility can help to reduce tension buildup and prevent the headaches and other problems related to prolonged periods of sitting or studying. They know that combining weights with aerobic exercise is an efficient way to lose weight. A person can eat the same amount of food and still lose weight, since increased muscle mass burns more calories. Typical weight-lifting routines for students eager to stay healthy amid the strain of college life are around 20 minutes a day, three times a week.

The "toners" hope to produce smoothly defined muscles. Not surprisingly, this category includes many young women. Lifting weights can target problem spots and help shape up the body. To develop solid arms, these people use dumbbells and a bench press. Other equipment focuses on achieving toned legs, abdominals, and buttocks. Toning workouts must be done more often than three times a week. I talked to a few young women who lift weights (after aerobic activity of some kind) for about 30 minutes, five times a week.

Athletes must lift weights. Volleyball, rowing, basketball, football – all of these sports require weight training. It may seem obvious that a football player needs to be muscular and strong, but

how do other athletes benefit from weight lifting? Muscles are a lot like brains; the more they are used, the more they can do. Strong muscles can increase a person's speed, flexibility, endurance, and coordination. Consider the competition required in various sports; different muscle groups matter more to different athletes. Runners, especially sprinters, need bulging thighs for incredible speed. Basketball players need powerful arms and shoulders for endless shots and passes. Gymnasts need all-over muscle development for demanding balance and coordination. Football brings all these areas into play in a contest that requires great strength, speed, and agility. Weight lifting is a vital part of athletes' intensive training programs.

One last group can't be ignored. Some people lift weights to become as big and as strong as possible. I worked out with a guy who is about six foot two and weighs more than 200 pounds. He bench-presses more than I weight. In a room devoted to dumbbells and barbells (also known as free weights), body builders moan as they struggle to lift super-heavy bars. After only a short time in this grunt room, it's clear the goal is not simply to be health, toned, or strong. These lifters want their strength to show. They want their muscles to bulge. Many participants do little if any aerobic activity. They spend most of their time lifting very heavy weights that build bulk and strength. My partner works out for an hour or more, five days a week.

Not everyone fits neatly into these four categories. Personally, I work out to be health *and* toned, and find that I can benefit from lifting only three times a week. Weight lifting has become more and more popular among college students who appreciate exercise as a great stress reliever. And for me, the gym proved to be the best place to combat that dreaded "freshman fifteen."