

# Machine Weights or Free Weights?

Walk into any gym and you will see lots of people using machine weights like lat pull down machines, leg presses, pec decks and so on. At the same time you will see just as many using free weights like barbells and dumbbells. Which are best? Machine weights or free weights?

When used properly and as part of a well planned, progressive weight training program both machine weights and free weights can effectively improve your strength and conditioning. However, they each have different advantages and disadvantages.

## Machine Weights

Machine weights are easy to use. Often all you need to do is to insert a pin into a weight stack or adjust the height of a seat and you can start your exercise.

Machine weights are also safe in that they guide your motions, helping you to maintain control of the weight and keep good posture at the same time.

Many machine weights are often designed for only one particular exercise or a single muscle group. This means you can be very specific about strengthening or rehabilitating one part of your body.

Finally, some exercises can only be done using machine weights or it is very difficult to do them safely using free weights.

There are however, some disadvantages to machine weights. Most machine weights involve moving a weight along a predetermined path and while this makes them easy and safe to use it also means that you don't need to recruit stabilising muscles when doing many machine weight exercises. It is still important to work stabilisers and so they often need to be worked separately.

Machine weights are also big and take up a lot of space, and so they are not always a good option for small workout spaces.

Finally, a lot of machine weights are designed for the 'average' sized person and sometimes have limited adjustability for different body shapes and sizes.

## Free Weights

Free weights are very versatile. It is possible to do a large number of different kinds of exercises with just a few sets of different free weights. In addition, you often have much more scope with the increments of weight you use. For example, you may be able to add 1kg to a free weight where a machine weight may only be able to be increased by 5kg at a time, meaning that the minimum increase is also 5kgs.

Using free weights often requires using stabilising and other muscles as well as the muscle(s) being targeted with a particular exercise. This may result in greater strength and conditioning gains than what would be achieved using a single purpose machine weight.

Further, free weights can be used through a greater range of motion than machine weights and so they can be used to effectively simulate sport specific or real life movement patterns. This means their scope for sport training or rehabilitation exercises can be greater.

Finally, free weights are relatively inexpensive, don't take up as much space as machine weight equipment and can be used by people of many different shapes and sizes.

As with machine weights though, there are also some disadvantages of free weights. For example, more skill is required to use free weights safely and effectively. Greater attention needs to be paid to posture, lifting technique and holding form so that all the muscles involved in free weight use are properly protected and/or strengthened. For particular kinds of free weight exercises it may be necessary to have assistance with lifting and/or lowering weights. It can also be difficult to isolate particular muscles with free weight exercises.

Notwithstanding the advantages and disadvantages of both machine weights and free weights it is possible to do very effective strength and conditioning training with both. For the best results though a combination of machine weight and free weight exercises are recommended.

A safe, effective and progressive weight training program incorporating both machine weights and free weights should be designed and supervised by a qualified and registered fitness professional or strength and conditioning coach.

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