



- Free Weights vs. Machines -

An important consideration when putting together a workout programme, is the distinction between Free Weights (i.e. Dumbbells, Barbells, Medicine Balls etc), and specifically designed Weights Machines.

Most novice exercisers tend to lean toward Weights Machines in their training, particularly in the early stages of their programmes. This is predominantly for the (quite understandable) reason that the Machines are usually easily marked with clear instructions, and nice colourful pictures of which areas they work. This straightforward 'ease of use' is perhaps the key benefit that Weights Machines offer, and their biggest attraction - having a machine that follows a clearly defined, non-deviating movement path has a number of practical and safety advantages for the less experienced exerciser.

It is worth taking the time to educate yourself of some Free Weight exercises as your strength/fitness levels increase however, for several reasons. Firstly, Free Weights provide a far higher level of versatility in your training programme. The use of Dumbbells, Medicine Balls, and more advanced training tools such as Kettlebells and Weighted Bags, allows for far more variety in your workouts, which is useful in both stimulating and maintaining interest and motivation. For those who participate in some type of competitive sport or activity, there is also the increased specificity these pieces of equipment allow you to work on particular movements and techniques.

The second main advantage of Free Weights over Machines, is the more functional, three dimensional workout they afford your muscles. When performing a Machine based exercise, the primary muscles involved in the exercise are usually working in a relatively linear plane - on the Chest Press Machine for example, the track of the movement arms of the machine is a fixed horizontal path. Performing the equivalent Free Weight exercise however (in this case the flat Dumbbell Bench Press), engages a whole spectrum of auxiliary and stabilizer muscles in addition to the prime movers. This is how your body natural works, multiple muscles working synergistically across multiple planes to facilitate smooth and controlled movements. Take a look also at my 'Compound vs Isolation Exercise' article, and the discussed benefits of involving as many different supporting muscle groups in an exercise as possible.

Most reputable Instructors and Trainers then, will lean toward Free Weights exercises when putting together a programme. The versatility they afford, along with the more functional workout they provide your body, means they offer significant benefits beyond what most Machine based exercises can provide. Machines do have their uses however, particularly for novice exercisers, and a good training programme can accommodate them both to varying degrees. Do take the time though if you haven't already, to get some educated advice from a Fitness Professional on some appropriate Free Weight exercise progressions, to ensure you're maximising your time and efforts in the Gym with the most effective workout options available.