Benefits of strength training

Intro

In my article 'High protein diets' I discussed the merits of providing your body with the fuel it needs to build and sustain muscle. This article probes a little deeper into the practical benefits of increased muscular strength in our day to day lives.

How strength improves

Lifting weights that feel heavier than what we are used to puts our muscles under a certain degree of stress and as a result they are temporarily weakened. The body's natural response to this weakened state is to rebuild the muscles so they are equipped to cope with a similar force put on them in future.

Depending on your current level of strength, and individual goals, the level of intensity must be high enough that the body recognises the need to make strength improvements. Furthermore, the intensity must be repeatedly increased, otherwise the body gets used to it and no additional improvements will be seen.

How does this benefit me?

One of the more obvious results of lifting weights is increased muscle mass, which brings about a whole host of changes in the body. The first is an increase in metabolism, which basically speeds up all chemical reactions in the body. If you gradually press the accelerator of your car down the car moves faster and uses more petrol as the revs increase – this is effectively what your body does when your metabolism increases. It is able to move faster, be stronger and consumes more calories, even at rest. Burning calories can be associated with losing weight when coupled with a healthy diet, but also keeps the body charged helping you feel active and confident. Longer term effects also include lower levels of cholesterol and a decrease in blood pressure, which collectively contribute to a greatly reduced chance of Coronary Heart Disease.

Nearly all the physical effects of ageing can be slowed down or even reversed with the use of strength training. Over time your muscles gradually deteriorate, your bones become more brittle, connective tissue like tendons and ligaments also become weaker, and your posture usually sinks as a result. Strength training not only acts as reminder to your body that these tissues are still being used but they will gradually strengthen too; your bones will become denser (and reduce chances of Osteoporosis), tendons and ligaments become tougher and, assuming your training programme is balanced, your posture will improve providing you with a stronger physical foundation.

Given a comprehensive strength training programme your body will become generally tougher, leaving you less susceptible to injury (you are less likely to suffer breakages if bones are strong and are protected by strong surrounding tissues), and can even aid recovery if injury does occur (stronger muscles around an injured area can speed up the healing

process). That said, with improved balance and posture from strength training you are less likely to take a fall in the first place!

Day to day activities

General improvements in body strength can give you the edge in nearly everything you do, such as playing with your kids, carrying your shopping, moving furniture, climbing stairs, or even standing up. A combination of strength training and flexibility can also work against the natural shortening of muscles for those who spend a lot of time sitting down. This is often inevitable, as many jobs involve sitting in front of a computer for extended periods of time where muscles adapt to their surroundings, but strength and flexibility training can counter this effect.

Quality of a training programme

It goes without saying that the safety of the subject undergoing a strength training programme is paramount – after all, a healthier and more active lifestyle is our objective. This said, the integrity of a training programme is important to ensure individuals receive the correct balance of strength, and must bear in mind postural imbalances and any specific goals they may have. A warm-up and cool down are also important aspects, minimising the chance of injury and maximising performance, and very heavy weights should only be lifted with someone there to assist if you have difficulties. All exercises should promote good posture, typically an open chest, neutral spine and firm stomach.

A comprehensive weight-training programme is one that consists of exercises for all parts of the body to ensure whole body strength – omitting major muscle groups would result in imbalances, to the detriment of the individual's health. For example, training only your 'beach muscles' (such as biceps, chest, and abdominals) might seem appealing to begin with, but will inevitably result in poor posture and uneven overall strength.

Conclusion

Strength training provides a series of benefits to anyone's lifestyle. Provided programmes are performed safely and with correct technique individuals can boost their metabolism to aid weight loss and management, improve their posture, work and play harder, reduce chances of injury, reduce heart disease, and counteract many of the infirmities that develop with age.