

How Many Exercises...
How Many Sets...
How Many Reps...

By
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How many exercises, how many sets, and how many reps per muscle should I do? This is perhaps, one of the most common questions asked of me over the years. My reply, for the most part is; how should I know! Now that may sound like not much of a response to a very good question and, just by the nature of the question, you can tell it comes from someone not very advanced in bodybuilding who is genuinely asking a very sincere question but: It is an honest and direct response.

If stated once it has been stated a thousand times; everyone is different. What works for one may not work for another. Meeting someone for the first time and not knowing a single thing about them, how can I answer their question and provide good and useful information? I can't. Over the years, even those that I personally trained and knew a good deal about, I had to make adjustments as I learned more how a particular exercise worked for them. I would also have to make adjustments in rest periods, intervals between workouts, frequency in training sessions, sets, reps, poundage used, supplements, diet, etc.

Bodybuilding is a science but not a specific one in that what works for one will also work the same for another. It is true there are some general rules for example, fewer sets and reps for adding size or lighter weights for higher reps and sets for endurance. These as well as other basics are common for all trainers, in the beginning that is. It is also a fact someone just starting out on a routine will make more muscle gains in their first three months of training than someone who is advanced. What I mean by this is; it is common for someone just starting out to add 3" of muscle to their arms in the first three months of training but an advanced bodybuilder will do well to add 1/2" of muscle to their arm in a

period of twelve months. Therefore, I am not talking about basic concepts. I am talking about the question of exercises, sets, and reps for someone who has been at it for a while. I have always felt that if a person asks a question they are entitled to an honest answer. The answer therefore is not a pat one and it definitely cannot be applied to everyone across the board.

When I trained someone, I wanted to know the following.

1. Age – height – weight – and present measurements.
2. How long have they been exercising.
3. What programs have they been on. (No short answer here, a full and complete outline must be provided.)
4. Diet and supplements they were taking.
5. Allergies as well as all health problems and any medicine they were using.
6. What are they training for.
7. Family medical history background.
8. I seek to know their mental capacity for training desire.
9. I determine their ability to follow instructions.
10. Determine what priority their training will be.

Ten components I always wanted to know before undertaking the training of someone for bodybuilding. Getting these components qualified could take some time and it could take a lot of space if you wrote all the responses down. I have seen some who were almost naturals and it took only a session or two to figure out. Similarly, I have worked with some who seemed to change with almost every session and it would seem just about impossible to get things right for them.

All of this to say; there is no hard, fast, and pat rule that can be applied and followed by everyone if, results are desired. The question, as valid as it may be, cannot be answered in one phone conversation, in a single letter, or in meeting someone briefly for one time. Advanced trainers recognize this, some intermediate ones do, and occasionally, some beginners appreciate this fact.

It would be easy to make up a diet, supplement sheet, and exercise program for gaining weight, losing weight, adding size, building endurance or general toning. The fact is however, this would not be in anyone's best interest. True, for the most part, a beginner would make progress but after three to six months what then? To make matters even more frustrating, for not only the trainee but the trainer as well is the fact most people won't even stay with an exercise program for more than three months.

I remember when I owned my gym. Surveys and my personal experience showed the average length of time a new member would use the facility regularly was three months. After that, their attendance dropped off dramatically, then they would show up occasionally, then once in a great while, finally they were nowhere to be found. This fact was always part of my ten-point evaluation I outlined above because it takes a lot of time and effort to put together a program only to find all that time wasted on people who would not stick with it. I use to have a saying; "Everyone wants to be Mr. Olympia but nobody wants to train." It came about over the many, many people that came to me over the years with all kinds of promises and desires and determination and quickly fell by the wayside in just a short time.

How many exercises, how many sets, and how many reps? If you are a beginner, select one compound power movement and one strict shaping movement for large body parts: chest, thighs, and back. For smaller muscle groups: biceps, triceps, calves, and delts: perform only one basic movement. For example the chest, select the bench press and dumbbell flies. Perform three sets of six to eight reps. Apply the two-rep rule. If your goal is to perform three sets of six reps and you can do eight reps, two reps up, or four reps, two reps down, the weight is about right. On the other hand, if you are performing three sets of six reps and the weight allows you to do nine reps, three reps up, or three reps down, the weight is either too light or too heavy. Allow yourself to go no more than two reps up or down from your rep scheme.

This is an example of a basic routine for a beginner using the three day per week schedule.

Monday – Wednesday – Friday:

Chest, Delts, Triceps, Forearms

I. Chest

1. Bench Press 3 x 8
2. Dumbbell Flyes 3 x 8

II. Delts

1. Dumbbell Press or Seated Press Behind Neck 3 x 8

III.

Triceps

1. Standing Triceps Extensions

IV. Forearms

1. Barbell Wrist Curl.

Tuesday – Thursday - Saturday

Back, Thighs, Biceps, Calves

I. Back

1. Bent Over Barbell Rows 3 x 8
2. Chins or Lat Pull Downs 3 x 8

II. Thighs

1. Full Back Squats 3 x 10
2. Leg Curls 3 x 10

III. Biceps

1. Barbell Curls 3 x 6

IV. Calves

1. Standing Calf Raises 3 x 10

Remember, the outline I have just provided is for a beginner only and it definitely will not apply nor work for an intermediate or, it goes without saying, advanced bodybuilders. It is a program designed to get one started. Naturally, people will want and tend to do more on their arms. Everyone wants arms. That is a very common error made by those just starting to train. They will over train their arms and under train their legs. Performed properly, chest and delt work will significantly work the triceps while the outlined back movements will do the same for the biceps. The arms are relatively small muscle groups and training them too intensely at the start is not wise.

What I can tell people, and I do, is what I did and or what others I have worked with have done, but I am careful to caution them that each person brings their own unique situation and that must be considered.

I recently took on a project of working with a wonderful young man who was not interested in bodybuilding at all. His goal was an increase in strength. He had just graduated from Penn State where he was an exceptional football player. He was going to tryout for the pros. The maximum he could bench press was 265 lbs. He had to increase this substantially and he had to perform 225 lbs for fifteen reps.

He came to me, stated his goals, and said he had only about three months time to achieve them. This young man was and is an exceptional one. He listened to every word I said and followed the instructions I gave him to the letter. In a period of just three months, he increased his maximum bench press from 265 lbs. to 430 lbs. He can now easily bench press 225 lbs. for twenty reps and more. DRUG FREE, NO STEROIDS!

My point in this, I am not some miracle worker. Yes, I do take pride in the knowledge and ability I have. Yes, I do feel good about the many success stories I have been a part of. The fact is, the young man I just mentioned also has youth on his side, a determined mental ability, a fierce competitive nature, willingness to listen and follow instruction, genetics, drive and willing to put forth all the effort required to achieve success and he has the potential that most are not blessed with.

How many exercises, how many sets, and how many reps should he perform? It would be different from what someone else would be required to do, don't you think? It's a very good question but not one that can be answered very easily.

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