

The Benefits of Unilateral Training

by Tamara Grand August 05, 2015



Traditional strength training exercises typically use both sides of the body at the same time.

Think chest press, chest flys, pushups, bent over rows, squats, dead lifts and shoulder presses. Both arms (or legs) doing the same thing at the same time.

While bilateral work is a great way to ensure that you're training both left and right sides equally (not to mention an efficient way of getting out of the gym more quickly), there are

times when a single-sided, or unilateral exercise, might actually be more beneficial to your training goals.

Incorporating unilateral exercises in your workout is a great way to:

- Increase strength on the weaker side of your body. Often our non dominant arms and legs are lacking in strength not only because we use them less in every day life, but also because during traditional gym workouts we unconsciously let our stronger side take over. Forcing each side of the body to work differently and separately immediately highlights any muscular weaknesses and imbalances that may be affecting our progress in the gym as well as our day-to-day functionality.
- Improve balance and kinesthetic awareness. Unilateral exercises require a strong kinesthetic awareness; the knowledge of where, in space, your limbs are relative to your torso. Next time you trip and 'catch' yourself before falling, congratulate yourself on your well-developed kinesthetic sense. Asking the left and right sides of your body to simultaneously perform different tasks forces you to create and strengthen mind-to-muscle connections that you might not otherwise use.
- Incorporate extra core training in your workout. Whenever we ask the right and left sides of our body to perform different movements we turn on our deep core stabilizers; the muscles that help support the spine and protect it from being injured by external forces. For example, lifting a single, heavy weight up and over your head requires the obliques on the opposite side of your body to contract and engage in order to keep your torso upright.
- Push through training plateaus. Sometimes we get stuck at a particular weight or progression of an exercise. No matter how hard we try to progress it, we can't seem to increase the difficulty or the load. Unilateral exercises can help you push through plateaus by forcing the weaker side of the body to become stronger (see above) as well as providing a slightly different stimulus to the body (akin to changing the angle of your chest press or the stride length of your lunge). Doing things a little differently is often the key to moving forwards.

Here's a quick, whole body workout that incorporates unilateral exercises.

Aim for 10 to 12 repetitions of each exercise on each side of the body. Beginners should complete the circuit once through, more advanced exercisers can shoot for 2-4 sets of each. As always, choose a weight (or progression) that allows you to complete all

repetitions in good form; if you can't get to the end of the set, you probably need a slightly lighter weight.

- Offset load squats: Start by standing with feet under your hips (or slightly wider apart), toes pointed forward (or angled out a bit), one heavy dumbbell held over your right shoulder, one light dumbbell held over your left. Drop your bum down and back. Push through your heels, keeping core tight and eye focus forward, to return to standing. Switch sides with the weights and repeat.
- Standing single arm shoulder press: Stand as described above for the offset load squat. Maintain a slight bend in your knees and tighten your belly and butt to protect your lower back. Hold two equal weight dumbbells at shoulder height. Extend both arms up and over your head, keeping weights slightly in front of your head. Keep non-working arm fully extended while you lower the working (weighted) arm towards your shoulder. Press back up to the starting position. Complete all repetitions on one side then switch to the other.
- Single arm chest press on the ball: Start by sitting on a stability ball (or a weight bench if balance is challenging for you). Holding a pair of equal weight dumbbells in your hands, walk yourself down until your head and shoulders are supported by the ball. Your lower body should be lifted into a reverse bridge, with hips up and feet wide apart. Extend both arms up straight over your chest, with palms facing away. Keep non-working arm fully extended while you lower the working arm towards your chest. Press back up to the starting position. Complete all repetitions on one side then switch to the other.
- Single leg dumbbell deadlift: Start by balancing on one foot. The other knee will be bent with foot help slightly above the ground. Hold a single, heavy weight in the hand of the non-working leg. Keeping focus forward and back flat, bend working knee, hip and ankle to lower yourself towards the ground, reaching across your body with the weight as you descend. Use your glutes, hamstrings and lower back to pull yourself back up to standing. Complete all repetitions on one side then switch sides.
- Three point plank. Come into a low plank, with weight on your toes and forearms. Maintain a straight line from the back of your neck to the back of your heels, lift one foot up and off the ground (6 to 8 inches is far enough). Hold for as long as you can before switching sides. Try and keep your hips facing forward the entire time.

Compare a bilateral version of any one of these exercises with its unilateral counterpart.

Did you notice a difference? Which was more challenging for you and why?