

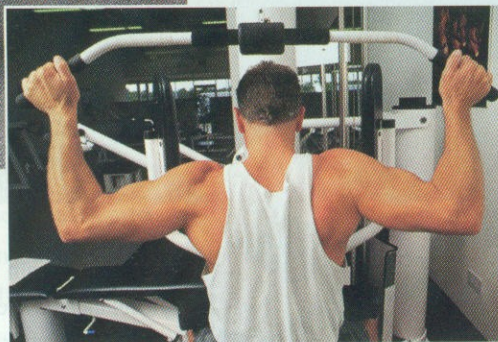
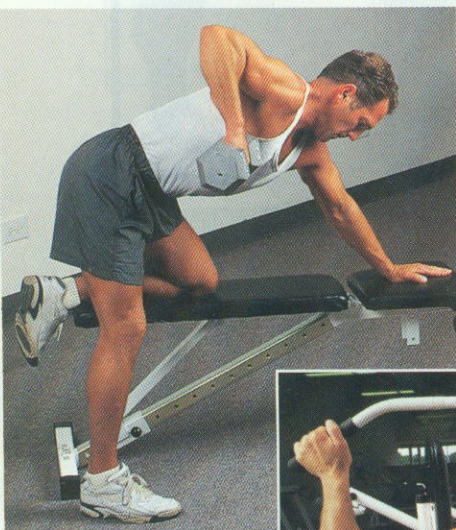
TECHNIQUE

Between
the Blades

Modern life isn't always conducive to good posture. Unlike our primitive ancestors, many of us sit at a desk all day, and we don't climb many trees or vines in our free time. One result of this inactivity is that the muscles that bring our shoulder blades together—the rhomboids and trapezius muscles, located between the shoulder blades—become stretched and weakened over time. Lifting weights actually can worsen the problem, as most of us focus on building muscle on the front side of our torso and neglect the less-obvious scapular retractors.

The lat pulldown and the

Backward focus: On rows and pulldowns, you should be able to feel the muscles between your shoulder blades at work.



bent-over row, when performed correctly, can strengthen these muscles and dramatically improve posture and appearance. The key to success is to focus on actively contracting the rhomboids and trapezius muscles when performing these exercises. Try to avoid involving the biceps and triceps. Using a lighter weight will help you concentrate on using your back muscles.

The lat pulldown should be performed smoothly in four steps:

1. Grip the bar with your palms facing away from you (palms facing toward you involves the biceps more). Start pulling the bar down toward the back of your shoulders by contracting your rhomboids and trapezius muscles, thereby pinching your shoulder blades together.
2. Continue to pull the bar down, using your shoulder adductors, including your lats, pectorals, and biceps. (Here the rhomboids are temporarily less involved.)
3. As the bar passes behind your head, focus again on contracting your shoulder blade retractors to complete the lowering phase.

End by gently touching the bar to the base of your neck.

4. Allow the bar to rise slowly to your starting position, taking twice as long for the return movement as the pull-down portion of this exercise. Throughout, try to keep your back completely stationary; don't lean back to gain leverage, as this takes work away from the rhomboids and trapezius muscles.

The bent-over row places even more demand on the scapular retractors than the lat pull-down and trains the often-neglected posterior portion of the deltoid muscle, or "rear delts," as well. This exercise, requiring a dumbbell and flat bench, also is performed in four steps:

1. Place your left lower leg and left hand on the bench so that your back is parallel to the floor and your right hand hangs down toward the floor. Let your arm hang down as far as possible without twisting your back. Holding the dumbbell in your right hand, contract your shoulder blade retractors to initiate the upward movement of the dumbbell.
2. Maintaining a 45-degree angle between your upper arm and your torso, continue to pull the dumbbell up toward the outer edge of your chest, using the muscles of your shoulders and your lats and biceps.
3. As the dumbbell approaches your chest, focus again on contracting your shoulder blade retractors to complete the upward portion of the exercise, until you gently touch the dumbbell to the outer edge of your chest.
4. Slowly lower the dumbbell to the floor, taking twice as long for the return movement as the "rowing" portion of the exercise. Repeat with the other side.

Perform two sets of each exercise twice weekly, alternating between 10 and 12 repetitions per set with a heavier weight one day, and 14 and 16 repetitions per set with a lighter weight the next time you train these muscles.—Gerald Greenspan, founder, Columbus (Ohio) Fitness Consultants

MOTIVATION

Putting It
in Writing

Are you part of the 99% or the 1%? "Ninety-nine percent of people go to the gym without any true outcome defined, without an outline as to how this workout will affect the next one, and how it builds on the previous one," says Todd Person, founder of the Metabolic Project, a one-on-one fitness center in Los Angeles. "It's the only area of people's lives where they're not working in an organized fashion. Doctors, lawyers, businesspeople all have blueprints for how they conduct their professional life, but

when they exercise they don't."

With a clear-cut goal, it's easier to overcome the inclination to skip your workout; after all, the decisions already are made. Person suggests putting your routine in writing—but don't make it overwhelmingly complicated.

For example, many experts say two weeks is long enough to follow one specific weight workout. You don't need more than 16 sets, according to Person—just pick eight exercises and do two sets of each. "Put down the number of repetitions ahead of time, and if you don't have enough energy to complete them, get those reps at a lower weight."

—Noah Liberman

REGIMEN

Double the Benefit

The bottom line? Just about everyone wants a great-looking derriere, and absolutely no one wants a sore back. Imagine an exercise that could simultaneously tighten your buns and decrease your risk of getting back pain. It exists—it's the glute-back extension.

This exercise can be performed with dumbbells or by using a piece of equipment known—somewhat incorrectly—as a hyperextension bench. (More on that later.) When performing the exercise with dumbbells, hold a dumbbell in each hand and bend your knees slightly, about 20

degrees. Slowly bend forward until your torso is parallel to the floor. Slowly return to an upright posture, focusing on using your back and buttock muscles.

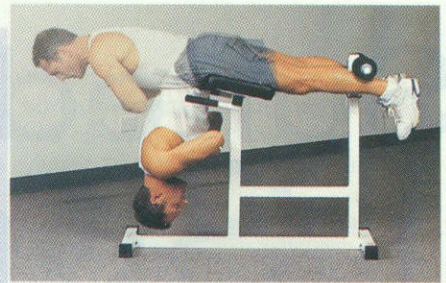
When performing the exercise on the hyperextension bench, position your body on the bench so that the front of your body faces the floor. To ensure adequate downward pelvic rotation, slide forward on the bench until you have provided a four-finger gap between the top lip of your pelvis and the end of the bench pad. Fold your arms across your chest and then slowly bend forward until your torso is perpendicular to your legs. Using your back and buttock muscles, rotate your pelvis and extend your back until your

torso is in line with your legs again. Be sure not to twist—the movement should be up and down.

Incorporate this exercise into your abdominal routine beginning with one set twice weekly, working up to three sets twice weekly. If you're using dumbbells, chose a weight that allows you to perform 20 repetitions per set without straining. Using the back extension bench, initially try to perform eight to 10 repetitions per set, increasing your repetitions until you can perform 20 reps per set.

One caveat: Proper mechanics are essential. The structural integrity of the spine

depends on the concerted efforts of numerous muscles and ligaments—some very small and running between only two vertebrae. Take care not to hyperextend your back (going past where your torso is in line with your legs). Hiring a knowledgeable personal trainer to give you guidance when learning the exercise would be a prudent investment.—G.G.

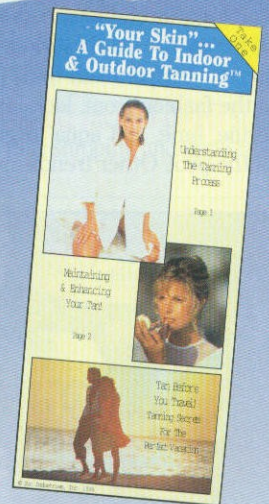


The back extension gets little attention—until exercisers find out it tones the rear end too.

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