



by Robin Weiss

TIP: Exercises You Probably Shouldn't Do

As we age, we need to face the fundamental truth that some exercises are no longer good, safe, or effective for us. Believing that -- if it's exercise, it has to be good -- can be hazardous to our health or a waste of our time. The truth is that some exercises and machines in gyms are not safe for people with common muscle, joint, and health problems; while other exercises and machines simply lack useful benefits.

Before we discuss some of the most controversial exercises, I want to emphasize that the exercises on this list are not unsafe or ineffective for everyone. Exercises that you should or shouldn't do will depend on your goals, fitness level, health history, workout schedule, and other personal issues. To assist you in identifying your goals and needs, talk to a medical professional about any pains or physical limitations you have. Then, seek the help of a personal trainer or other fitness professional to develop a program that uses proper exercise form and technique.

5 Red Flags That Indicate An Exercise May Be Risky

1. An unusual or "unnatural" movement pattern in the exercise
2. A movement that causes pain or discomfort
3. A movement that contributes to muscular imbalances that already exist
4. A movement that requires joint flexibility above and beyond your range of motion
5. An exercise where the risk of injury outweighs the potential benefit

With this framework, we can better understand why the following exercises are generally considered contraindicated (they pose high risks) by fitness organizations and experts.

1. Behind-the-Head Lat Pull-down

The lat pull-down works the muscles of the mid and upper back. To further emphasize the back, we used to teach people to pull the bar behind their head when doing a lat pull-down. This is no longer the case due to current knowledge that raises safety concerns.

The problem: Only people with very mobile shoulder joints can keep their spines straight enough to do this behind-the-head movement properly and safely. Done wrong, this exercise can lead to should impingement or even a tear in the rotator cuff. Another concern is hitting the back of the neck with the bar and causing an injury to the cervical vertebrae. If you spend a lot of time at a desk or driving, you're likely to have rounded shoulders. Poor posture is a symptom of poor shoulder flexibility, so this exercise is definitely not for you.

The Alternative: You can still work your lats using a lat pull-down, without the risk of a behind-the-head pull-down, by pulling the bar down in front of you. Sit with your back straight, abs engaged, and then lean your torso back slightly while keeping your back straight. With a wider than shoulder width grip, pull the bar down towards your chest, but not below your collarbone. Do not use momentum to swing the bar up and down.

2. Squat or Leg Press with Deep Knee Bend

Whether you're doing basic standing squats or using a leg press machine, it can be very dangerous to bend your knees too deeply.

The Problem: When your knees bend too deeply into a squat, your spine can't maintain proper alignment. To compensate, your pelvis tilts and your lower back begins to take over. This increases the risk of strain to your lower back muscles or damage to your spinal discs. In addition, bending your knees too deeply while under load can injure or damage your knees, especially if you already have knee problems.

The Alternative: Squats and leg presses are generally safe and effective when you bend your knees and hips to no more than 90 degrees. You can further protect your knees by pushing into your heels throughout the movement.

3. Seated Leg Extension

This is a very popular exercise for targeting the muscles on the front of your thighs (the quadriceps).

The Problem: This exercise poses major risks to the knees. Lifting heavy weights in this position (with the resistance focused at your ankles), is not what the knee was designed to do. If you have any kind of knee problem, or use too much resistance during this exercise, you can easily strain your knee.

The Alternative: Squats and lunges with or without added weight, will work your thigh muscles naturally, safely, and effectively. If you can't do lunges and squats because you lack the leg strength, start with ball squats or a modified lunge where you only lower yourself part way and gradually increase your range of motion as you get stronger.

4. Inner (Adduction) and Outer (Abduction) Thigh Machines

These machines are popular with the ladies in most gyms. Both involve sitting with your knees bent in front of you. The adduction machine is designed to target the muscles of the inner thighs as you squeeze your legs toward the midline of your body. The abduction machine targets the muscles of the outer thighs as you push your legs away from your body's midline.

The Problem: Using your inner and outer thighs to lift weight while in a seated position puts you at risk of straining these relatively small muscles and aggravating lower back and hip problems. In addition, your inner and outer thigh muscles are designed to support movement, not to be prime movers like they are in these exercises.

The Alternative: You can target these muscles safely and effectively with standing or lying adduction and abduction exercises. Body weight alone can be effective. But, if you're strong enough, weight can be added with tools such as resistance bands, light dumbbells, or a cable machine.

5. Upright Row

In this exercise, you stand holding a barbell, or other resistance, with hands closer than shoulder width apart. You then pull the weight up to your collarbone leading with your elbows. The proper execution of this exercise requires your arms to be bent at the elbow and then internally rotated. Upright rows target your trapezius, deltoids, and biceps.

The Problem: Upright rows are controversial due to the amount of upper arm internal rotation that occurs during the exercise. A problem arises in internal rotation when you raise your arm and add resistance in that position. This movement can compress the nerves in your shoulder area, impinging a small tendon in your shoulder. Over time, the tendon will become worn and damaged.

The Alternative: Instead of standing to perform an upright row, try bent-over rows with a 45-degree bend at your hips and pull the weight towards your chest. You can also do front and side shoulder raises for your anterior and lateral deltoids, respectively. The weight should be challenging, but not so heavy that you need to lean back or use momentum for assistance. Shrugs can be substituted for upper trapezius development.

References: Sparkpeople.com 2008, wikipedia.org 2008, sportsinjuryclinic.net 2008, wowbodybuilding.com 2008, webmd.com 2008