

Choosing the *Right* Strength Training Equipment

BY GREGORY J. FLOREZ



There is no question that strength training is hot. In 1999 over 20 million individuals participated in regular strength training activities up 58% from 1990 (Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association - SGMA 2000). Women in particular are dramatically embracing strength training (up 172% in the last decade - SGMA 2000).

Individuals are finding that strength training is critical for almost every goal from injury prevention and post rehabilitation to weight loss and better sports performance.

The keys to successful strength training lay in choosing the right equipment and using it properly. For most individuals, purchasing a "selectorized home gym" is the safest and most practical way to strength train. A quality, selected unit will have the following things in common:

- Weight stack that can be adjusted with just a push/pull of a pin
- Highly adjustable lifting positions for a variety of user sizes and shapes
- A variety of exercises that are biomechanically sound
- Accessories to increase the number of exercises you can perform

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Shopping for your equipment

1. Consider your goals and the goals of other potential exercisers in your home before you start your search.

From our 14 years of personal training experience we've found that most families have more than one person who is interested in fitness or sports. An example of a family looking at purchasing strength training equipment might include a new mom who wants to lose weight and improve her tennis game and a teenager who wants to get stronger for a sport. Understanding and discussing each user's goals will protect you from buying a unit that will not withstand the use of multiple family members or have the proper adjustability for a variety of user sizes.

2. Start your shopping with an authorized specialty fitness retailer.

Selling strength equipment is more difficult than selling a treadmill or other cardiovascular equipment. A sales person must understand basic physiology and how to perform a variety of exercises.

Make a list of local retailers who specialize in fitness equipment - not hockey, basketball or golf. These dealers will likely have a more educated staff to fit you properly with a home gym. Additionally, home gyms require fairly intensive installation procedures. A specialty dealer will have more experience in their assembly. A quality dealer will even be able to recommend a certified personal trainer to help you get started on your home training program properly.

3. Go to the store prepared to test the equipment and perform several different strength exercises.

Have a sales associate demonstrate an exercise then allow you to perform as many different strength movements as possible. Make sure that you get a chance to include major muscle group exercises e.g. shoulders, back, chest, legs, calves, etc. on the equipment. This is critical when you take into account that many home gyms will be comfortable with a few basic exercises, but it's only when you begin to use the full spectrum of exercises that you will notice shortcomings in the lesser quality machines.

4. SPACE - Measure the dimensions of the space planned for your home gym before you venture out to a store. This includes height, width, and length of the space. Write it down and take it with you. You'll be pleasantly surprised to find that the newer machines are amazingly space efficient.

5. BIOMECHANICS - Simply put, this means how the machine fits your body. The only way to determine this is to try the equipment performing as many movements as possible while in the store. You don't have to be a personal trainer to know if it fits. Let your body intuitively guide you. Here are some tips: When you perform a seated chest press you should feel it in your chest, not your joints and not in your lower back. This goes with all exercises on the machine. A rule of thumb here is to have the sales associate tell you where you should feel the exercise. Have them demonstrate the movement for you.

Next try the movements yourself. Feel the exercise. Make sure that you feel the exercise in the muscle, not the joints or some other part of the body. If you do not feel the movements in the correct place, ask the sales person to adjust the machine and try it again.

As you are using the machine make sure that pivot points on the machine line up with the joints on your body. For instance when performing a leg extension the pivot point should adjust so that it is perfectly even with your knee joint. When performing a seated chest butterfly the pivot point should be in line with your shoulder joint.

6. SMOOTHNESS -

This is not a generalization. If the equipment feels smooth when you are performing the exercise, it is probably a higher quality machine. This means that throughout each and every exercise there is no "catching" or "sticky" feeling. A good machine will feel silky smooth throughout each exercise. To test this, try the most expensive machine on a retail floor and then try the least expensive. You will quickly understand the difference.

7. FEATURES -

Here are the basics to look for in a quality home gym:

Pads - Look for polyurethane, molded pads on all of the press arms and areas that come in contact with your body. Some models even have contoured pads that are designed to fit the shape of your forearm, lower back, etc. High quality here also means that pads won't dry out, smell, or crack after repeated use.

Bearings - Wear points occur at the major pivot points of the machine where movement is initiated. Quality machines will have bearings that reduce wear and tear over the long term. Look for oil impregnated brass bearings. Ask the sales associate for details.

Materials - Look for 11-gauge steel that is at least 2"x 3" in diameter. This makes for a stable machine that will feel solid for a lifetime. Quality machines also use powder-coated paint. This finish will repel sweat and corrosion.

Stability - Generally speaking the more welds mean more strength and stability. This means there will be less "wobble" when using the machine and long term durability. Every machine will have some bolted pieces, as well as welded pieces.

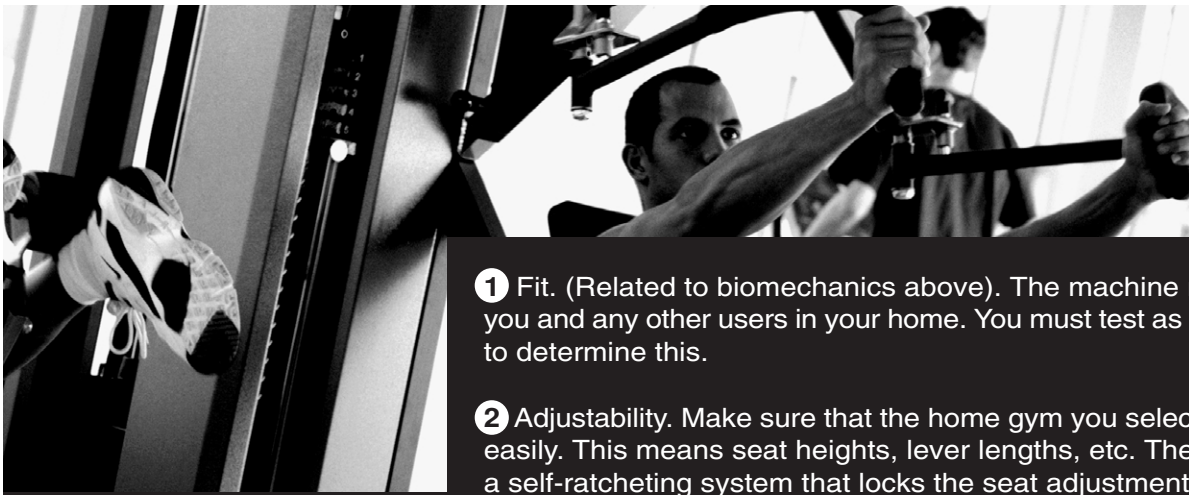
Cables & Pulleys - Look for nylon pulleys and test cable of at least 1500 lbs. This will insure that the pulleys and cables will hold up to the most rigorous use for a lengthy period of time.

Accessories & Attachments - Good home gyms are amazingly versatile even beyond the initial basic unit. Padded ankle straps to work inner and outer thighs, abdominal straps, and straight bars for arm exercises are examples of accessories that can truly increase the value and flexibility of your home gym. The better units will come with some of these accessories as part of the basic unit. While shopping, ask the following questions: What attachments are included with this equipment? What attachments are available to "grow" the home gym? Other popular additions include an added leg press or more weight plates for the basic weight stack. This is helpful if you have teenagers or budding athletes in the home whose needs will change as they become stronger.

- 1 Take your time.
- 2 Start with a reputable specialty fitness dealer.
- 3 Ask the hard questions mentioned above.
- 4 Test the equipment thoroughly.
- 5 Think long term for both your goals and other family members. This will keep you from under buying.

Things to Remember





Must Have's

- 1** Fit. (Related to biomechanics above). The machine must be adjustable to fit you and any other users in your home. You must test as many positions as possible to determine this.
- 2** Adjustability. Make sure that the home gym you select is adjustable, quickly and easily. This means seat heights, lever lengths, etc. The best machines will have a self-ratcheting system that locks the seat adjustments in place.
- 3** Size. Remember to measure your space before you begin shopping. Only look at machines that will fit your space requirements comfortably.

Remember, don't be intimidated by what you don't know. Ask the sales person to show you each exercise and explain its purpose. If it doesn't feel right to you, let the sales person know. Dress comfortably and plan on spending at least 30 minutes testing any particular machine.

Shopping for strength training equipment can be daunting as it is usually the least understood portion of exercise. One of the surest ways to buy right is to go with a manufacturer that has a history of quality. In the fitness industry this means considering companies that have made fitness equipment for home and commercial users. These companies will have in depth experience in knowing what consumers want and will use and as importantly what does not work. Additionally, they will have experience with issues surrounding durability and proper fit and biomechanics. This will give you piece of mind that your equipment will hold up for many years to come.

The shopping phase is the foundation to make sure that you choose wisely and protect your investment. Take your time. Start with a reputable specialty fitness dealer. Ask the hard questions mentioned above. Test the equipment thoroughly. Think long term for both your goals and other family members. This will keep you from under buying.



Motivation

Okay, let's face it. Strength training is not usually a stroll in the park. It requires focus and proper form. If you are doing it correctly it will also be somewhat uncomfortable.

Remember that what matters in the long term is whether or not you use the equipment day in and day out. Some of the most useful added features include:

1. WALL CHARTS - Every home gym should come with a wall chart. Many are nearly useless in helping you use the equipment as they are overly complicated and don't provide easy instruction. Look at the wall chart while at the store. Refer to the instructions and perform the exercises as directed. Make sure that they make sense. Ask the salesperson for clarification if necessary.

2. PERSONAL TRAINING - Some specialty fitness retailers will offer an in-home personal training session with the purchase of a new home gym. This is an extremely helpful way to get started correctly. Following that first session you may decide to continue with a personal trainer for additional motivation and guidance. Seeing a personal trainer even once a month can greatly increase your chances of success in reaching strength training goals.

3. ONLINE SUPPORT - Increasingly manufacturers and dealers will offer online assessment and coaching from a certified personal trainer that is specific to the product purchased and your goals. Ask about this when shopping.

About the Author

Gregory Florez oversees the nation's premier personal fitness and educating company. First Fitness is considered the leading experts on the fitness and sports and fitness industry. Gregory and his staff provide information, education, coaching, and tools to consumers, sports and fitness professionals, equipment manufacturers and retailers, and health care payers and providers worldwide.

Gregory is featured in publications such as The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, The Washington Post, MSNBC.com, Men's Journal, and Ladies Home Journal magazine.

Safety and Maintenance

Perhaps more than any other category, safety is a factor in choosing strength training equipment. Home gyms provide safety and convenience features that cannot be found in free weight equipment. These features translate to safer, more time efficient workouts for most individuals. There are no screws to turn, weight plates to load and unload, and most of the lifting positions are already pre-determined. This means you don't have to be an expert or an athlete to get a highly effective and safe workout.

1. SHROUDS - Some quality gyms will have a housing or shrouds to cover the weight stack and exposed pulleys. This minimizes the chance of clothing or fingers getting pinched.

2. WEIGHT STACK PINS - Practice putting in and taking out the weight stack pin. Make sure that there is a system to lock the pin in place. Practice doing some of the movements and make sure that the pin stays in place. Some systems even have "shaped" pins that make insertion into the weight stack easy. These pins will also "lock" into place.



3. ADJUSTMENT PINS, ETC. Look for self locking heavy duty spring loaded pins for adjusting seat heights, and lengths. Make sure that if you slip or cannot complete an exercise, that the machine allows you to let go without hurting yourself. Ask the sales person about features that "spot" you. In other words if you are performing a chest exercise there should be a mechanism that prevents the levers of the machine from falling or striking you.

Maintenance Tips

- **Cleaning** - Quality home gyms require hardly any upkeep. A gym that has been powder-coated (paint) needs only to be wiped down occasionally to remove sweat. The pads on the machine need to also be wiped down occasionally with a mild detergent to remove sweat.

- **Lubrication** - Guide rods need to be lubricated once or twice a year using a Teflon based lubricant that can be purchased at a local hardware store. Check lubrication on guide rods once a year and replenish the Teflon based "super lube" if needed. Make sure to read the manufacturer's instructions, including which type of lubricant should be used.

- **Warranty** - There is very little that can go wrong on a high quality piece of strength training equipment assuming that it is purchased from a specialty retailer and assembled properly. There are no electronics and moving parts are minimal. A home gym frame should come with a lifetime warranty. Cables and upholstery should come with at least a three-year warranty. It is unnecessary to purchase any kind of extended warranty on a high quality home gym.

