

Gym Safety

(Ron Jones, MS, ACSM Health Fitness Specialist, Corporate Wellcoach)



Move Well ☺ The most important safety strategy for any form of exercise is to make sure you have good joint function before loading with external weights and resistance. If your joints are tight, have poor biomechanics, or compensations, you create sheer force that causes micro trauma—especially when loading with increased resistance. Clean movement patterns go a long way for workout safety! When you move well, you can train yourself over time to move efficiently under a load and enjoy years of quality exercise and movement.

Belts: Lifting belts don't prevent back injuries. A strong core with clean biomechanics, good technique, and sensible lifting prevent back injuries. Regular belt use can weaken muscles by artificially supporting them. Instead of working the muscles and having them get stronger, the belt will take the work away from muscles making them weaker. In the end, a weak back will likely be a back with pain and injury.

Breathing: This varies by lifting activity. For general lifting, breathe out as you exert yourself and breathe in as you relax and let the weight back down. In kettlebells and some martial arts, they use "pressurized" breathing designed to increase body tension. Throughout much of the effort, breath is held until the end of motion. Final release of breath is pressurized—sort of a "hissing" or slight release of air. Pressurized breathing is a safety technique for increasing stabilization of the spine of other joints. For the average person doing light to moderate strength work, just remember to breathe, and you'll be fine.

Children: Commercial gyms have age limits for members, but many use home gym equipment now. There are many safety issues at home with small children. Be careful with "Line of Fire" issues to keep children out of the working or "live areas" of weights and equipment. Examples: An Olympic bar going up and down during a squat can strike a child in the head. Kettlebells use ballistic "swing" patterns with many exercises and thus require more live space. It's a good idea to mark off "live" areas and create some Do Not Enter rules to keep kids safe. With cardio equipment and weight machines, some designs have exposed *pinch points* that can damage small fingers and hands. Motorized treadmills can cause severe "degloving" hand injuries as the child's hand gets pulled into the revolving belt area—skin, muscles, tendons, and nerves can literally be torn away from the bone. It only takes a second for a child to be in harm's way with fitness equipment—think ahead BEFORE using gym equipment at home to prevent accidents.

Clothing: Keep your clothing out of the way. Be careful of dangling strings and clothing parts that might get caught on machines. Due to hygiene, many gyms don't allow open sleeves or shirtless workouts. Covering your back will act as a protective barrier when using weight benches and mats. Some users prefer to dress warmly to retain body heat, but this is personal preference.

Free Weights: Can be better for you because you use more postural muscles—but only if you already have the proper training. If using heavier free weights, it's a good idea to work with a trainer or "spotter" in case you need help completing your last rep. Make sure to use legs when racking weights because just lifting the plates or bars can hurt your back if you are out of position.

Housekeeping: Beyond hygiene, it is also important to *replace equipment to proper storage areas* to eliminate trip hazards. Dumbbells, weight plates, balls, mats, tubing, etc. should all have specific areas for storage.

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Hygiene: Because of the rise in bacterial infections like MRSA, *hygiene has become one of the most important gym safety issues today.* Proper hand washing is your best defense. Keeping skin covered that comes in contact with equipment surfaces is also important. Use actual clothing as a barrier or a workout towel to cover benches, mats, etc. Uses gym wipes as directed at the local gym to minimize hygiene problems. Washing gym clothes in hot water with bleach is advised. *Refer to my MRSA handout for more hygiene specifics.*

Lifting Position: Make sure you're positioned right for each specific exercise. Center your body under the bar or weights when possible. If you're lifting free weights, make sure you're using your legs and directly facing the weights before you grab them.

Quantity of Reps: Basically about 8-12 but 12-15 is better for beginners. Whatever the "last rep" is, it should be the last one you can do "safely" WITHOUT breaking form and endangering your health.

Shoes: For general lifting and group exercise, most sport shoes are fine. For power lifting, many will use shoes with harder soles, such as Converse All-Stars, to reduce lateral shoe movement stressing ankles during heavy and explosive lifts. For kettlebells and martial arts, most use hard sole shoes like power lifters, or use NO shoes so they get the best force transfer and optimize their stabilization from the ground up. Soft "air soles" are not advised for heavy and explosive lifting activities because they cause too many force leaks in the foot/ankle complex.

Situational Awareness: Attacks and robberies can occur in gym parking lots. Create a "situational awareness" of the parking lot surroundings so you don't become an easy target by being distracted. Before you arrive, lock away valuables or leave them at home (some gym robberies also occur "inside" locker rooms). Look around the area as you arrive—not at a text message. Avoid tall shrubs and large vans, etc. that can conceal someone hiding. LISTEN! Leave ears open without distraction from cell phones or MP3 players. Get a staff escort or help from a gym friend if you feel uncomfortable.

Speed: Lift with control—it's safer for beginners, and you'll get stronger that way. Speed lifting with explosiveness requires more technique and training.

Spotters: A good idea if you are using *heavy* free weights because if you burn out and don't have a partner—you can strain your body or even suffer an injury. In most cases, light to moderate free weights shouldn't require a spotter unless you are a novice—just remember to *lift only what you can control* even at the end of your set.

Stance: Basic rule is shoulder width stance or slightly wider—this gives you a wider base of support and makes it harder to lose your balance or fall. Keep legs straight but without hyperextending the knees.

* Ron Jones (5.11.09)