

PERSONAL TRAINER

NETWORK

The official publication for personal trainers & gym instructors
WINTER 2006



Australian fitness
network

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The bent-over row

Gyms are full of machines designed to help us row our way to a strong upper back. Many people prefer free weights though, and two exercises in particular have become popular for upper back work: the bent-over row and the one-arm dumbbell row. The fact that bent-over rows are now commonplace in barbell classes (where they are often called 'dead-rows') means that fitness centre clients are doing this exercise more than ever. Maybe it's time to have a closer look at how a bent-over row and its one-armed version should fit into a training program.

Is the bent-over row a good exercise?

Yes, but there are two issues which must be considered if it is to become part of a routine. The first thing is the importance of technique. In a bent-over row, the target muscles and the source of the resistance are a long way

from each other. By the time the weight in your hands transfers to your upper back, it's been through your wrists, elbows and shoulders. The legs, hips and lower back may also help move the weight, so the potential to 'waste' a lot of the resistance is significant. This is a shame, because the upper back muscles are very strong and can handle heavy weights. Also, the exercise itself is hard; it's too much work to do to see any of it wasted. The way to make sure the upper back really works is to use proper technique. People in barbell classes, particularly, need to be consistently reminded about how to do this exercise. Even a minor technical flaw can turn a bent-over row into, at best, little more than a forearm exercise or, at worst, a lower back injury waiting to happen. The technique for bent-over rows was covered in detail in the Spring 2005 issue of *Network* magazine.

The second consideration is when you start 'going heavy'. The gorilla-like body position in a bent-over row involves bent knees, hips to the rear and lower back held concave for safety. The torso is tipped forward while the row is performed. When a heavier weight is used, greater strength is required to hold this body position. The lower back especially needs to work harder because, as far as it's concerned, the weights are at the end of a long lever - the torso. A slight increase in barbell weight will, because of

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The bent-over row

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this leverage, become a significant increase for the lower back to handle. When you also consider that the exercise can become ballistic, maybe during a heavy set or towards the end of a tiring workout, you can see that the lower back will be subject to significant stress, even from a small increase in resistance. This is where many exercisers get into trouble; the upper back muscles can take the extra weight but the lower back eventually can't. Continuing past this point means that either technique suffers, or the lower back does. You want neither of those things to happen.

Considerations when increasing weight

You shouldn't change the movement. If the extra weight doesn't translate straight to the working muscles, and you're maintaining proper technique, then the exercise has reached a point of nil return for you. This can happen in weight training - some exercises have a basic design limitation which prevents progress past a certain weight, irrespective of the capability of the rest of the body, or the target muscles, to handle the load.

You shouldn't, as some people do, perform the exercise with the forehead resting on a high bench or support so that the neck takes some of the extra strain of supporting the angled torso. The potential for serious neck injury is obvious.

You shouldn't depend on a weight belt for the extra support you need. The ability of a weight belt to support the lower back is limited, unless it is extremely tight, and if a tight belt is used, it will interfere with your breathing during the exercise. It is better to depend on tight core muscles.

You needn't work hard to develop a stronger lower back just so you can do a heavier bent-over row. Your upper back will always be able to row a heavier weight than the lower back can support while you perform it.

You could use training straps (which loop around your wrists and then the bar). Straps are excellent for preventing hand and forearm fatigue if you have to grip a heavy bar. They're great for bent-over rows, but be aware that they won't do anything to support your lower back. Eventually, the lower back will still reach its limit.

You could perform a similar movement in a machine which supports the torso while you row. These often work well, but, being machines, they have lots of fixed points and fixed planes of operation and may not offer the advanced trainer the experience they're after. (Some gyms have a high horizontal bench with brackets underneath which hold a barbell, specifically for barbell rows. The exerciser lies prone on the bench, lifts the bar off the brackets and rows. The



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Editor
Oliver Kitchingman

Advisory Committee
Xen Angelides
Gavin Aquilina
Lisa Champion
Jon Mailer
Analee Matthews
Andrew May
Kerry McEvoy
Mark McKean
Andrew Simmons
Andrew Verdon

Graphic Designer
Jack Lee

For all editorial or advertising enquiries contact:

Oliver Kitchingman
Australian Fitness Network
Ground Floor, 40 Oxley St, St Leonards, NSW 2065
PO Box 1606, Crows Nest, NSW 1585
Ph: 02 8424 7286 • Fax: 02 9437 6511
E-mail: oliver.kitchingman@fitnessnetwork.com.au
www.fitnessnetwork.com.au

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special bar has a curve in it allowing the exerciser to row and not bump the bar on the underside of the bench. This apparatus eliminates any involvement from the lower back and legs. The theory is good, but many trainers find this exercise awkward).

You could leave the weight as it is and increase the intensity of the exercise another way; e.g. more and/or slower reps, more sets or less rest between sets. If you don't want to gain more absolute

strength or size in the upper back, these are good options. (In barbell classes, the intensity in a bent-over row tends to come from the high reps used).

Is there anything I should do?

You should consider doing a one-arm dumbbell row. It may take a little longer to complete your upper back work doing one side at a time, but it's the best way to apply significant free-weight resistance to the upper back. It also features other benefits:

- The exercise is safe; it's performed with the hand and knee of one side on a bench, while the other foot is stable on the floor. The spare hand holds the weight. The lower back and legs are kept out of the action and the upper back (one side of it, anyway) is isolated.
- You tend to get a better range of motion. The hand on the dumbbell can be partially supinated so the dumbbell can come very high, close and parallel to the torso, and it can be lowered straight down to a point below the midline of the body. With a barbell, the hands are kept pronated and are a fixed distance from each other all the time, leading to a slightly smaller range of motion during the row.
- The only limitation to going heavy (assuming your gym has a big enough barbell!) is the strength of your hand and forearm to hold the weight. As we've discussed, training straps are a great way to remove hand and forearm fatigue and ensure the weight you have in your hand goes straight to the working muscles. (Some say that using straps prevents the development of a strong grip. If you are training to develop a strong grip this is true to some extent, but if this is not your aim then it is an irrelevant argument). ♦



Tony Podpera

Tony is a Canberra-based fitness instructor. He began bodybuilding in the early 1980s and has advised clients on weight training issues for 20 years. He started teaching group fitness classes in 1994.



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