

BUILDING BICEPS

with discipline and better technique

BECAUSE BICEPS ARE RELATIVELY SMALL MUSCLES and biceps exercises can be strenuous, improving them requires a very disciplined approach and careful attention to technique. Picking and choosing the right exercises for your client will help. Let's have a closer look at some of the more common ones.

Barbell biceps curls



Barbell biceps curls; stay upright and control the movement

Barbell biceps curls are the original biceps exercise and are still the best. Whether a straight or a bendy bar is used does not really make much difference (unless the hands are very pronated during the curl, which we'll discuss later). It is important to resist the temptation to swing the weight up or lean too far back when curling the weight. Cheating like this is certainly a legitimate training technique for advanced trainers during a tough biceps set, but care should be taken as a 'cheating' set can become ineffective (and possibly dangerous) if the weight is swung too much or if the body leans back too far in order to complete a rep. It is better to stay upright, control the movement and if necessary, get someone to help force an extra rep.

Heavy one-arm standing alternate dumbbell curl

A heavy one-arm standing alternate dumbbell curl allows the trainer to lean into each alternate curl and arrange their body and hand position to achieve the best angle for the exercise. If performed correctly, the biceps really feel the weight of the dumbbell through a long contraction. A few sets of these can be a great change from barbell curls and, if done properly, are worth the extra time they take.



Heavy one-arm standing alternate dumbbell curl; if performed correctly, the biceps feel the weight of the dumbbell through a long contraction

Note: Curling heavy dumbbells *simultaneously* is awkward and doesn't allow the optimal body position to be adopted for each individual curl, so alternately lifting and lowering one dumbbell at a time is preferable.

Seated incline dumbbell curls

Seated incline dumbbell curls are a fantastic isolation exercise. With the palms supinated to about 45 degrees through the whole movement, the natural position of

the arms in relation to the body isolates the biceps and helps prevent elbow movement, which is important (see below). The biceps also work through a very long range of motion. If these are performed smoothly through a full range, they will target the biceps like few other exercises can. The relatively light weight and the stable arm position mean that the exercise can be performed with both arms at the same time. The incline bench shouldn't be angled too far back, but experiment with the bench angle to find the most comfortable and effective position for your client.



Seated incline dumbbell curls; the natural position of the arms in relation to the body isolates the biceps and helps prevent elbow movement

Preacher curl

Another popular biceps exercise is the preacher curl. The lifter sits on a bench, leans forward and drapes his arms over an angled elbow rest. The arms are supported, isolated and held still while a barbell or dumbbell curl is performed. Some people with big arms, such as old-time bodybuilder Larry Scott who made this exercise famous, choose this exercise, but it isn't as effective as many people think. As the elbow flexes, the biceps contract as the weight travels upwards. In a very short time, though, the weight starts to



Preacher curl; the arms are supported, isolated and held still while a curl is performed.

travel horizontally through space and the biceps effectively stop working. For this reason, a preacher curl could be said to be a 'bottom-half' exercise. It can be effective, however, if a steeper preacher bench is used. A much better alternative is a preacher bench in which the bar that is gripped is directly linked to a cable apparatus. The

bench and the continuous resistance provided by the cable apparatus provide stability and biceps isolation, making it a superb biceps exercise.



The exercise isn't as effective as commonly thought; the weight starts to travel horizontally through space and the biceps effectively stop working.

You and your clients may find other biceps exercises effective, but they will just be variations on a theme: all biceps exercises simply flex the elbow with a weight in the hand. It is worth considering a few other general points about effective biceps training.

Elbow movement:

The more your elbow moves, especially laterally,

during biceps (and triceps) work, the less effective the exercise will tend to be. A constantly shifting elbow means that the angles at which the arms are operating are always changing slightly. This makes it harder to achieve the kind of overload that muscles working through a constant angle

encounter and respond to. Also when your elbows move around a lot during an exercise, too much energy is spent stabilising arms when your total effort should be directed to flexing your elbows and performing a curl. Try doing a cable biceps curl or cable triceps extension with your elbows supported or fixed and then try it with your elbows unsupported and this stabilising will be apparent. This tends to be more of an issue with cable and simultaneous dumbbell curls so keep that in mind.

Hand supination: Many people perform dumbbell curls with a built-in supination. That is, they start a curl with their hand slightly pronated (palm facing in) and as they curl, they supinate their hand (twist it outwards). The theory is that, since biceps function not only to flex elbows but to also supinate hands, supination should be a part of a biceps exercise. The difficulty is that the more a hand is pronated, the more the brachoradialis, not the biceps, contributes to elbow flexion. This point is perfectly illustrated by the reverse curl. By starting a curl with a pronated hand, the 'biceps' curl is really a biceps and brachoradialis curl, until such time that the hand is sufficiently pronated to remove any meaningful brachoradialis contribution. By that point, though, a lot of the elbow flexion in the exercise has already been performed and there's not as much work for the biceps to do. If you want to train your biceps, it's better not to pronate your hands. A rare exception might be if you are near the end of a tough session of dumbbell curls and you need a little help getting a curl started. Another exception is if you have a vulnerable or injured elbow which hurts when fully extended at the end of a curl. While a pronated hand will increase the stretch within biceps muscles during full elbow extension (and will therefore result in a better range of motion) it can place your elbows in a vulnerable position. A slight supination at this point can relieve the stress on the elbow joint while it's fully extended.

A few final points:

- training straps are great for biceps work. And if you work hard enough, your forearms will still get a good workout just from your curls.
- most people don't need to do specific forearm work – a good biceps routine will take care of forearms too.
- in spite of a few 'scientific' studies which claim some back exercises are sufficient to build biceps, you won't build serious biceps without doing serious biceps training. ■



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