How to Build the Perfect Body

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Introduction

No one training program works for every client, just as there is no one version of “perfect” to fit all body styles and training goals. However, we can all work to improve our health and fitness to find our unique versions of perfect. The content compiled here breaks down five key areas of the body—shoulders, chest, back, glutes, and legs—and how you can train smarter to achieve your goals.

Then, when you’re ready to learn more, you can sign up for the ISSA’s Certified Fitness Trainer course or another specialty to take your training to an even higher level. Make the jump from simply achieving your goals to helping others achieve theirs as well.

Shoulder Exercises for Mass

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Shoulder Exercises for Mass

Well-developed shoulders are key to building a powerful athletic physique. One of the biggest missed opportunities when creating a shoulder workout is neglecting to train all three heads of the deltoid muscle. Balanced development is what gives the shoulders definition and shape.

The deltoid is the main muscle contributing to powerful, well-defined shoulders. It consists of three heads: anterior, lateral, and posterior. Each head manages a different movement at the shoulder.

- Anterior deltoid: Found at the front of the shoulder, allows for flexion of the arm and internal rotation at the shoulder
- Lateral, or medial deltoid: Middle part of the deltoid muscle, attaches to the shoulder blade and aids in lifting the arms out and away from the body
- Posterior deltoid: Located on the back of the shoulder, allows for extension of the arms and external rotation at the shoulder.

Shoulder Exercises for Mass

So, which exercises should you include when clients are looking to build muscle mass? What exercises engage all three portions of the deltoid muscle?

Most shoulder exercises activate all three heads to a certain extent. However, specific exercises can be used to emphasize each portion of the muscle. The following five exercises incorporate the different portions of the deltoid muscle in varying degrees. These are great movements to include in your clients' shoulder workouts.

Front Arm Raises

Front arm raises are a great exercise. They target the anterior and lateral deltoid but also slightly engage the posterior deltoid as well.

Begin standing with feet shoulder-width apart. Grip a dumbbell in each hand with palms facing your thighs. Slowly raise the arm to forehead height, keeping elbows slightly bent. Continue to lift dumbbells until your arms are parallel with the floor. Slowly lower the arms to your starting position.

Your clients can perform this exercise one arm at a time or with both dumbbells at the same time. Also, if free weights are not available, use a cable machine.

Seated Dumbbell Arnold Press

This movement is a fundamental mass building exercise that targets the anterior and lateral deltoids

Begin sitting on a bench with your back straight. Grip a dumbbell in each hand and hold them at chest level. Keep the elbows bent with palms facing the body. Push the weight up off your chest while rotating the weights so that the palms face forward. Continue to push the dumbbells up until arms extend and elbows lock overhead. Pause for a second at the top, then slowly lower the dumbbells back to your chest.

Dumbbell Lateral Raise

This exercise puts focus directly on the lateral deltoids.

Begin standing with feet shoulder-width apart, knees slightly bent. Hold a dumbbell in each hand with a neutral grip so that your palms face your side. Keeping a slight bend in the elbow, bring the dumbbells up and away from the body. Maintain a tight core and torso to stay upright when raising your arms out to the side. Lift the weights until your arms are parallel with the floor. Slowly lower the dumbbells to your starting position.

Rear Military Barbell Press

The rear overhead press is a great mass building exercise that focuses on the lateral and posterior deltoids.

Start seated with a barbell resting on your neck and upper back. Grasp the barbell with an overhand grip, hands slightly wider than shoulder-width. Keeping the torso tight and back straight, press the weight up off your shoulders. Keep fists pointed up to prevent strain on the wrists in the overhead position. Continue to push the barbell up until elbows lockout overhead. Pause at the top of the press before lowering the barbell back down to your starting position.

Barbell Overhead Press

This press is an excellent mass building exercise. It focuses heavily on the anterior and lateral deltoids.

Begin standing with feet shoulder-width apart. Grasp the barbell with palms facing forward, hands slightly outside the shoulders. This movement will begin with the barbell resting on the front of your shoulders at chest level. Keeping the core tight, press the barbell up until the arms extend overhead. Slowly lower the barbell back down to chest level.

Building Strong Shoulders with the Right Workout Routine

Just as important as knowing the right exercises to perform, is knowing how to perform them to see the best results. Muscle growth is all about breakage and repair. When we lift a heavy weight, our muscles need to generate a force greater than the weight we are trying to move. This force results in structural damage to the muscle fibers. This damage stimulates a repair response within the body.

When creating shoulder workouts for mass development, it's important to lift heavy loads to inflict this targeted damage to the muscle fibers. The body's repair response can then lay down new muscle fibers. It is the laying down of these new muscle fibers that results in muscle growth.

Key Training Variables

There are two important training variables to keep in mind when developing a shoulder workout routine. A review in the Journal of Strength and Conditioning Research discusses these variables as well as the underlying mechanisms and optimal protocol for muscle growth. To maximize muscle growth in your clients' workout routine, manipulation of these two training variables is essential.

Intensity

Intensity has arguably been claimed as the most important variable for muscle growth. It refers to the energy or physical power needed when performing an activity. Intensity can be equated to the number of repetitions performed in a workout. Low (1-5) to moderate (6-12) repetition ranges have proven to trigger more of a muscular growth response in comparison to higher (15+) repetition ranges.

Volume

Volume is a measurement of the total weight lifted over the duration of a workout.

Volume = Sets x Repetitions x Weight

The formula for calculating volume is simple. It includes three variables—sets, repetitions, and weight. Alter these variables to increase or decrease total workout volume. Developing workouts with progressively increasing volume will promote greater muscle growth in your clients and will ensure they do not plateau over time.

When creating a shoulder workout for your clients, keep intensity and volume in mind. Combining ideal intensity (low to moderate repetition ranges) with progressively increasing volume will have your clients building stronger shoulders in no time!

Building Strength Upon a Solid Foundation

To maximize your client's efforts, be sure they're building their newfound strength upon a solid foundation. Two key foundational pieces to healthy muscle development are stability and nutrition.

Stability

The shoulder has almost 360 degrees range of motion. This makes it one of the most mobile and functional muscle groups of the body. However, with this degree of motion comes an increased risk of injury. Therefore, your clients need to develop strength in the smaller stabilizing muscles of the shoulder before moving heavy loads. Developing sound stability of the shoulder is key to reducing risk of injury.

Training for shoulder stability involves strengthening the rotator cuff muscle group. The rotator cuff consists of four smaller muscles. These muscles serve to stabilize and maintain integrity of the shoulder. A great way to strengthen the rotator cuff muscles is by using isolation exercises. You can perform many stabilizing exercises with resistance bands, which is a great way to ensure a solid foundation for building shoulder strength safely.

Nutrition

If your clients are serious about gaining muscle mass, they need to get serious about their nutrition. Clients looking to build muscle mass want to know what they can do to maximize their time in the gym. Yet, just as important is knowing what to do outside the gym. More specifically, knowing what to eat to support muscle growth.

It's important to make sure your clients are consuming adequate calories and including all three macronutrients to support their stronger shoulder journey. To build muscle, the body needs to be in a positive caloric balance (calories consumed > calories burned). If your clients are not consuming enough calories, they will find themselves in a negative caloric balance (calories consumed < calories burned). This will place the body in conservation mode which does not support new muscle growth. Remind your clients that time outside the gym is just as important as time inside the gym.

Shoulder stability and solid nutrition will provide a firm foundation for your clients looking to build muscle mass. Remember to incorporate movements that target all three portions of the deltoid muscle to give your clients' shoulders the definition and shape they want. Strive to optimize workout intensity (low to moderate repetition ranges) and seek progressive workout volume. Maximizing these variables will have your clients on the road to building a powerful physique in no time!

Interested in learning more about how nutrition can support building muscle mass? Take your knowledge to the next level—check out the ISSA's Sports Nutrition program!

UNIT TWO

Bench Pressing to Improve Chest, Shoulders, and Core

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Should every one of your clients know how to bench press? The answer is YES! The standard barbell flat bench press is an effective full-body movement beneficial to all clients from the weekend fitness warrior to the seasoned, high-level athlete. It will improve chest, core, and shoulder strength as well as build shoulder and core stability.

A flat bench press focuses on the deltoids, pectoralis major and minor (pecs), the triceps, and the latissimus dorsi (lats). To best aid your clients in improving their bench press, preventing injury, and avoiding plateaus, you will want to know and use accessory exercises that focus on these muscle groups regularly. Once a week won't cut it, either!

Research shows training a muscle group two times a week is ideal for building and maintaining or improving strength and hypertrophy. Whether your clients train with you every workout or on their own at times, help them change the mentality that once a week is enough for results! You, as the professional, can recommend the proper weights, modalities, and movements to help reach their fitness goals.

Know Your Client and Their Abilities and Limitations

Common limitations in the general population include rotator cuff injuries, elbow and wrist pain, frozen shoulder, and other range of motion impairments, or even simply tight pectoralis muscles. The source of these issues is often their working conditions (e.g., sitting at a desk 8-10 hours a day) and poor repetitive movement patterns like improper form when training. The injury-prone shoulder joint should always be a focus for all clients. If you have a client with a shoulder injury, focus on shoulder exercises to reduce injury on a regular basis!

Ensure you are asking about your client's limitations and injuries before beginning a fitness program. Also, continue to check in with them throughout your training protocol to gauge if they are seeing and feeling improvement. Something as simple as stretching before and between sets may help with range of motion. With other clients, you may need to implement a protocol of light band and core work as part of their warm-up to promote blood flow and loosen the muscles you intend to target that day.

Accessory Exercises

These accessory exercises are a great supplement on a chest day as well as independently.

Push-Ups

The basic wide push-up is a staple "push" movement in any trainer's toolbox. Done from the toes or the knees with hips low for a solid high plank, this movement will target core strength, chest, triceps, and shoulder stability and strength.

To progress, a narrow (or close grip) push-up will focus more on a concentric triceps extension. With both versions, ensure hands stay at mid-chest level and shoulders are down and away from the ears. This will ensure proper shoulder range of motion and minimize the involvement of the trapezius.

Pull-Ups

This is the functional movement most people should be doing but don't! It focuses on back strength, latissimus dorsi activation, biceps, triceps, and core strength. There are many variations of a pull-up:

- Scapular retraction and modified range of motion
- Machine-assisted
- Band-assisted
- Unassisted

The scapular pull-up involves the client in the hanging start position of a wide grip overhand pull-up. They will limit the range of motion to lift the chest and engage their lats. They will only move a few inches before releasing back to the start position, but you are training them to activate the correct muscles. Once they master this, the next step is pulling to halfway through the range of motion (90-degree elbow bend) before returning to the hanging start position (assisted or not).

The assisted versions progress from the machine to the band, to a person, then to the unassisted variation when the client has mastered their form and can complete the movement with proper activation and stability. Bigger, stronger lats will lead to a bigger bench press!

Triceps Extensions

Yet another movement with many variations! Training the triceps as an isolated movement will help them get stronger faster as they are a major synergist to the bench press. The triceps are a smaller muscle group, so your client may not need to use heavy weights. This is a great muscle group to focus on time under tension versus higher resistance to promote muscle growth and minimize injury. Slower, more controlled movements will yield better results!

Depending on your client's shoulder limitations and range of motion, you can hit triceps with:

- Skull crushers
- Overhead triceps extension
- Dumbbell or cable triceps kickbacks
- Dips (machine or bench)

Keep an eye on shoulder and elbow alignment with triceps movements. All of these require external rotation of the elbow, which brings the elbows tighter to the body. Your clients will also need proper mobility through the shoulders—muscle tightness in the pecs will limit this. Be sure to stretch and address this before beginning a triceps movement.

Dumbbell Chest Press

This variation of the bench press will differ when using dumbbells. It targets the same basic muscles, but the use of dumbbells will require more shoulder stability and control as the client is creating the range of motion and path of the weight. To progress and challenge your client, place them on an incline bench to target upper pecs and shoulders. They can also begin in the fully flexed starting position and alternate arms for the eccentric movement.

This is a good chance for the trainer to ensure external rotation at the elbows and monitor elbow and wrist position. The wrists should be as flat as possible with the weights resting on the heel of the hands with the thumb wrapped underneath and the fingers over top for a proper grip. The dumbbells should also stay wide at the bottom of the movement—over the elbows versus the shoulder.

Floor Press

This movement focuses on the chest and triceps as well as shoulder stability. The floor press is an under-utilized exercise. It is identical to the dumbbell chest press, but it is performed from the floor. This will limit the eccentric movement as the elbows reach the floor. As the concentric push begins to return the dumbbell to the top, the triceps are more heavily recruited for the press. This is commonly referred to as the "sticking point" in the chest press or bench press. It is the halfway-point of the press on a bench where the triceps must activate to complete the elbow extension.

Chest Fly

Focused on the anterior deltoid and the pecs, the chest fly engages the core and shoulder stabilizers with the proper extended range of motion. Commonly done with free weights, you can have your client use cables (standing or seated) as well. The range of motion will be the most effective to engage the full pectoralis if the elbows are extended with a soft bend and kept and mid-chest height, shoulders down and packed.

To progress, try an incline bench or unilateral (single-arm) reps.

Training the Whole Client

Adding these exercises into a client's routine will help them improve their bench press in less time. You will keep them coming back for more sessions by teaching them in every session and training their body as a whole. This includes everything from the warm-up to the workout and the cool down.

If teaching and fitness are passions of yours, become an ISSA personal trainer! You can have a career you love waking up for sooner than you think!

UNIT THREE

Training for a Stronger Back

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Many clients are after the aesthetically appealing look of the well-developed back. However, a strong back is more than just a look. A properly trained back can help reduce back pain, improve athletic performance, and support core movements throughout the day (lifting, bending, etc.).

To build strength, it's important to add extra load and stress to the muscle. However, engaging the muscles properly without weight is much more important than doing an exercise incorrectly with a bunch of weight. So, correct form and muscle activation first and then continue to stress and strengthen the muscle.

There are a variety of exercises you can use with clients to help strengthen their back. Review the following beginner, intermediate, and advanced moves for three of the main muscles in the back. You can also use the order of exercises as a way to progress. But keep in mind, any fitness level can do any of these exercises as long as they are done correctly.

Trapezius (Traps) Exercises for a Stronger Back

The traps are a fairly large diamond-shaped muscle of the back. It attaches to the back of the head, neck, and upper spine and then again near the shoulder. The trapezius has three parts (lower, middle, and upper). Each part has a specific functionality. The trapezius, as a whole, is known as the muscle that helps you shrug your shoulders. But, that is the functionality of the upper traps. Many people put a lot of emphasis on the upper traps when training the muscle. However, for a strong and stable back, clients should emphasize the lower and middle trapezius which helps support proper posture and stabilizing the shoulder.

Beginner Exercise: Prone "Y"

To train the lower portion of the traps, you will need to learn how to engage them first. The Prone "Y" is a simple exercise that does not require weight. Lay face down on a flat surface or bench. Arms should be extended above the head and out slightly to the side (about 45 degrees), creating a "Y" with your arms. The outside of the palms should be resting on the ground but palms should be facing each other with the thumbs pointed up at the ceiling. Focus on keeping the shoulder blades back and down and slowly raise and lower your arms.

Intermediate Exercise: Cable Face Pull

The pulley should be set to about face height. Grab the rope with an overhand grip, thumbs up. Step away from the machine to put tension on the cable. Engage glutes and core muscles in an athletic stance. Squeeze shoulder blades together while pulling the rope towards your face. Work on keeping the shoulders dropped and the elbows high. Slowly release and return to the starting position.

Advanced Exercise: Bent Over Dumbbell Row

Stand with feet shoulder-width apart and soft knees. With dumbbells in each hand, slowly hinge at the hips while keeping the back straight. Let the arms hang directly in front of you. Keep your core tight and still and slowly bend the elbows while pulling the weights up to your sides. Keep the elbows in tight and focus on squeezing the back muscles together. Slowly release back to the starting position.

Latissimus Dorsi (Lats) Exercises for a Stronger Back

Lats are one of the largest muscles in the body. They are flat, triangle-shaped muscles that go underneath the arm and insert on the front side of the humerus bone. They connect to the lower half of the spine and down to the iliac crest. The lats connect on a few other places on the back as well. Because of this, they help our bodies perform a variety of different movements and are strong stabilizing muscles.

Beginner Exercise: Assisted Pull-ups

Before progressing to a bodyweight or weighted pull-up, focus on doing the exercise correctly and engaging the lats. You can do this by using the assisted pull-up machine or by attaching a resistance band to the pull-up bar and your foot to offset part of your body weight. Follow the form for the Intermediate Exercise Pull-up below.

Intermediate Exercise: Pull-up

Grip bar with both hands, about shoulder-width apart and palms facing out. Fully extend your arms so you are in a hanging position. Engage the lats and slowly pull yourself up. Keep your shoulders back and down and drive the elbow towards the floor while the lats contract. Keep your chin and chest up and imagine pulling your chest towards the bar. Slowly lower back down.

Advanced Exercise: Weighted Pull-up or Wide Grip Pull-up

Once you have mastered the form of a bodyweight pull-up, you can challenge yourself by adding a weighted vest to your body. You can also change the grip position into a wide grip pull-up. So, instead of gripping the bar shoulder-width apart, grip the bar about 30-45 degrees out from each side of the body. So, when you hang, your arms look like a “Y”. Follow proper pull-up form.

Erector Spinae Exercises for a Stronger Back

The erector spinae is a group of long muscles that run vertically alongside the vertebral column from the sacrum to the upper ribs and cervical vertebrae. They primarily support the head and spine and assist in back extension, head rotation, and lateral flexion (side bends). The erector spinae group isn’t considered a major muscle, so it is sometimes overlooked. But, it is an extremely important muscle because it helps stabilize our spine, support proper posture, and plays a key role in our core strength.

Beginner Exercise: Superman

Lay face down on a flat surface. Both arms and both feet should be stretched out about shoulder-width apart. Slowly raise both arms and legs off the floor at the same time. Aim for about six inches off the floor. Focus on lifting your chest off the ground using just your back muscles. Visualize engaging those muscles each time you lift. Keep face pointed at the floor to keep the neck in a neutral position. Pause for a one-second hold at the top. Slowly lower legs and arms back down to the ground. If needed, you can modify this exercise by alternating between raising one arm and one opposite leg at a time.

Intermediate Exercise: Stability Ball Back Extensions

Position yourself face down on top of the stability ball. Toes should be stretched out behind you and legs spread apart enough to create a solid, stable base. Place your hands behind your head and engage glutes and core muscles. Raise your torso upward using your lower back muscles. Feet should remain firm on the ground. Slowly lower back down to starting position.

Advanced Exercise: Dumbbell or Barbell Deadlift

Ensure you are using appropriate weight to start your dumbbell or barbell deadlift. Remember, correct form is more important than more weight. Keep your shoulders back and your torso straight throughout the deadlift movement. Hands should grip the dumbbells with palms facing the top of the thighs. Slowly hinge at the hips and lower the torso until it is about parallel to the ground, keeping the weights close to the shins. Push through the bottoms of the feet and pull yourself back to standing. Extend hips and contract glutes at the top of the lift.

Building a Strong Base

Keep in mind that there are more muscles in your back than just these three. And, there are a variety of exercises that can effectively strengthen the back muscles. Learning to engage the proper muscles correctly during an exercise is the key to a strong functional back. These exercises are starting point to help your clients build the back they want and need.

If you are interested in learning more about how back pain, shoulder pain, knee pain can be reduced when muscle imbalances and movement dysfunction are corrected, check out ISSA's Corrective Exercise Specialist Course.

UNIT FOUR

How Do I Build the Perfect Glutes?

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Everyone wants to be strong and fit. But let's face it, they also want a perfect butt, glutes, or backside. It's one of the most common things clients ask for. You've figured out how to correct overactive and underactive muscles involving the glutes, and now it's time to get into the specifics.

First, circle back to the key muscles involved. Those that give the nice, curvy bottom include the gluteus maximus, gluteus medius, and gluteus minimus. A lot of our daily movements, like walking or running, involve these muscles, and yet, most people never train them specifically.

When you do train your gluteus muscles, it's possible to achieve hypertrophy, or growth in the size of the muscles. The secret is to target each of the glute muscles and to progressively overload them with high intensity.

You can achieve this within any range of reps, but you get the best muscle hypertrophy results from a rep range of six to twelve and with a heavy resistance.

Check out our Bodybuilding Certification or our Certified Fitness Trainer program to get the latest on hypertrophy gains.

Can't I Just Squat and Lunge?

From a lot of people who haven't done their research, you'll hear: "Just squat more! And dead lift more!"

Squats, deadlifts, and lunges definitely hit the glutes, but they also target a lot of other muscles, like the quads, hamstrings, abs, and others.

Although some people may build a beautiful derriere from just squatting, deadlifting, and lunging, one size does not fit all, and this approach may not work for everyone. For those who need a little extra help, or don't want to spend all their time in the squat rack, hit those glutes directly.

If you want to really build an impressive tush, you need exercises that cause the highest percentage of muscle activation from the three gluteus muscles.

The glutes are most activated when the hips are near full extension, so focus on exercises that target the glutes and achieve this full range of motion.

Your Best Bets to Target the Glutes

Now, let's get specific. What exactly are the best exercises for seeing growth in the glute muscles?

- Side plank abductions
- Single-leg squats
- Hip bridges
- Kettlebell swings (with an emphasis on hip thrust with glute contraction)
- Hip external rotations
- Single-leg elevated hip thrusts

Most of these exercises achieve a 70% or greater maximal voluntary muscle contraction (MVIC). The higher that percentage, the more you're working those glutes and the faster you're moving toward bigger muscles. Side plank abductions come out on top with 103% MVIC, and single-leg squats are the next best with 82% MVIC.

Don't Forget the Legs

Impressive results in glute muscle development also come with an added glute-intensive workout day. But you should also include your legs because they are all related.

On Monday, dedicate your workout to leg exercises that also hit the glutes:

- Heavy barbell squats
- Split lunges
- Hamstring curls
- Leg extensions

On Friday or Saturday, workout to strictly "booty building" and put your glutes through the ringer.

The progressive overload principle, which is the "gradual increase of stress placed upon the body during exercise training," is the key to your progress here. This is the most important principle in strength training, and it gives you the best results in muscle growth and strength.

This is because muscles increase in strength and size when they are forced to contract at tensions closest to their maximum. To achieve this, you can:

- Perform more reps with the same amount of weight.
- Increase the resistance load and perform the same amount of reps.
- Add more sets of "work" to a specific muscle group.

Train the Glutes SPECIFICALLY

The takeaway lesson here is squats and deadlifts are not a sure guarantee. You cannot simply squat and deadlift your way to a firm and curvy backside.

It's a pretty simple principle: If you want to grow big, strong biceps, you have to train your biceps, not your triceps. So, if your client wants to build bigger, stronger glutes? Train the heck out of the glutes, not just the other surrounding muscles in the legs.

What if your client says: "I'm happy with my quad and hamstring development, but my glutes are not up to par. I want to build my glutes up more but keep my quads and hamstrings the same size."

A tough goal to achieve for sure, but possible. Most of the women who say this likely report they squat, deadlift, and lunge just as much as the guys.

This is exactly why their glutes are lagging behind the development of their quads and hamstrings—most of those exercises are compound movements. The other muscles of the leg take over during the movement instead of giving the glutes their highest percent of muscle activation.

Most importantly, remind your clients who want bigger butts: Adding squats and lunges alone may not do the trick. They must add specific, targeted glute exercises and workouts at least once a week.

Ready to begin a new career helping clients improve their form and overall fitness? Sign up for the ISSA's personal trainer course online so you can begin changing lives!

Beverly Paquin

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UNIT FIVE

Building Symmetry in Your Legs

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Don't skip leg day—we've heard it before, and we'll hear it again. But what we don't hear a lot of is what to work on during leg day. Most people go for those "mirror muscles" when they head to the gym, the quads, abs, and shoulders. Often forgotten on leg day are the glutes and the hamstrings. Both of those groups are going to be equally important.

This article covers the hamstrings and why they are important. Not only will training your client's hamstrings give them symmetry in their legs but it will also help increase the strength of other muscles, help improve metabolism, and help prevent injury.

Muscles of the Hamstring Group

Before jumping into the importance of training the hamstrings, run through this quick refresher about which muscles make up the hamstring and what those muscles do.

The hamstring group is made of up three muscles:

- Biceps femoris
- Semitendinosus
- Semimembranosus

These muscles start at the bottom of the hip bone, cross the knee joint, and attach to the lower leg at the fibula and tibia. Your hamstring helps with your ability to sit, stand, walk, and even run.

Biceps Femoris

This muscle controls many of the actions in the leg. Some of the major functions include flexing the knee, extending the hips, rotating the lower leg when the knee has a slight flexion, and helping in the lateral rotation of the thigh when the hip is extended.

Semitendinosus

The semitendinosus takes part in the extension of the thigh from the hip, flexion of the knee, and internal rotation of the knee when it is in flexion.

Semimembranosus

The final muscle, the semimembranosus, works on hip extension, knee flexion, and internal rotation of the knee when it is flexed.

These muscles have similar responsibilities, but it takes training them for them to work together to be strong to support those movements. Keep in mind, just because they are opposite of the quadriceps doesn't mean that when the hamstrings are working the quadriceps are not and vice versa. The leg muscles are unique in that they all work together.

Why Train the Hamstrings?

As your client works on hamstring exercises, they'll notice the glutes and quadriceps getting stronger at the same time. It can be difficult to isolate the hamstring muscles, which part of why as their hamstrings get stronger so will the muscles around them.

The legs are the largest muscle group in the entire body, so as the quads, hamstrings, and glutes all get stronger, your client will have an increase in muscle mass. This, in turn, will cause their body to burn more calories. Which is why as you work your legs more, your metabolism will increase.

Most people, especially women, are typically quad dominant. This often happens from a lack of training and, for women especially, from wearing shoes with heels. High heels cause them to rely more on the quadricep muscles for most of their day. This can lead to many problems in the knee, hip, and even pelvis and lower back. Therefore, it is so crucial to build up that posterior chain, specifically the hamstring muscles, to prevent these injuries from occurring.

Exercises for the Hamstrings

Now that we've gone through the basics of the hamstring group and why it's important to train those muscles, let's go over exercises targeting this muscle group. There are many options out there, but the following five hamstring exercises are some of the most popular options used to target this muscle group.

Romanian Deadlift

The Romanian deadlift can be performed with the same technique using either a barbell or dumbbells, though a barbell is the more common approach. Have your client start with their feet about hip-width apart. They should hold to bar wide enough that bar falls at hip level. Keeping their shoulders back and tight, back arched, and a slight bend in the knees, have them lower the bar ensuring that the butt is moving as far back as possible. The bar should not be able to go much lower than the knee if this is done correctly. Once your client hits that range of motion, they'll slowly bring the bar back up to the starting position, using the hips to drive forward.

Kettlebell Swing

There are two different types of kettlebell swings. First, for the Russian kettlebell swing, the kettlebell will stop at about the height of your eyes. With the American version, the kettlebell goes all the way over the head until the arms are fully locked out and the bottom of the kettlebell is directly overhead. The Russian version is more common, so that's the version described here.

To start, instruct your client stand with their feet shoulder-width apart, toes pointed slightly out, and knees with a slight bend. Have them hold the kettlebell between their legs. Then, ensuring they keep the arch in their back, they'll bend their hips back which will force the kettlebell back behind the legs. Cue them to use

their glues to extend the hips, forcing the kettlebell to go upward. The kettlebell should reach the height of their eyes. Then, in a controlled manner, they'll lower the weight back down to the starting position and go immediately into the next rep utilizing the momentum of the kettlebell. If they feel these in their glutes and hamstrings, it's a good sign they're doing them correctly.

Glute Bridge

To perform the glute bridge, your client will start by lying on their back with their knees bent and feet about hip-width apart and directly under the knees. Remind them to engage their core then squeeze the glutes to lift the hips, creating a diagonal line from the hips to the knees. Then, in a slow and controlled manner, return down to the starting position. They can hold this exercise at the top or perform this exercise for repetitions.

Stability Ball Hamstring Curl

To perform the stability ball hamstring curl, your client will begin in the same position as the glute bridge except for this time the feet will be on a stability ball. The ball should start close enough to their body that when they fully extend their legs, their feet are on top of the ball.

To begin, raise the hips off the ground, just like with the glute bridge. They'll keep their shoulders in contact with the ground while extending the ball out, creating a diagonal line from the feet to the shoulders. Next, they will bend the knees and bring the ball back in as close to the body as possible. They should feel this in the hamstrings. This exercise is typically performed for repetitions.

Good Morning

Your client can perform the good morning exercise with either a band or a barbell, though these directions use the barbell. Have your client start with the barbell in a back-rack position, same as what they would use for a back squat. Their foot stance should be slightly wider than shoulder-width apart and, like the squat, toes pointed slightly outward.

Instruct your client to engage their upper back and ensure they keep a good arch in their lower back, again, similar to the squat. They should have a slight bend at the knees and be pushing their butt back as they start to bend forward at the hips. Have them bend forward until their torso is slightly above parallel. Then, slowly raise back up to the starting position, engaging the glutes and hamstrings to get there. This exercise is typically completed for repetitions.

Ready to Learn More and Maximize Your Training?

This content is just the beginning. If you would like to learn more about other exercises and how to work different muscle groups, check out ISSA's Certified Fitness Trainer program. It's a journey to help you make the most of your training and to help you help others in achieving their fitness goals.