

## The Real Deal: Medicine Ball Training

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archive article, added 03/10/2008



Medicine balls can offer much needed variation to a workout routine and introduce new movements that are difficult or awkward with dumbbells. Medicine ball training often falls under the category of functional training, as most people define it because it allows you to mimic real life movements such as throwing and twisting with added resistance.

Medicine balls can be used for exercises like bicep curls or overhead presses in the same way as dumbbells without much imagination at all. The fun comes from trying new things like throwing, twisting, rolling, bouncing, and combination movements.

Not all medicine balls are created equal. Some are resilient and bouncy, some are softer or fuzzy like big tennis balls and some are even squishy. There are balls with off-centered cores that wobble when rolled and there are various fillings such as sand, gel, water, solid rubber or pressurized air to change the function and feel. Some balls even have one or two handles for gripping and controlling in different ways. The style of ball chosen depends upon what types of exercises are anticipated. The other thing to consider is the weight of the ball. It's a good idea to have a variety of styles and weights available.

One of the great advantages of using medicine balls is being able to catch and throw. The power required to throw and the decelerating action required to catch is like plyometrics for the upper body; a great way to condition your muscles in a new way. Balls can be thrown to a partner or trainer, but with some styles a trampoline can be used for rebounding. Throwing and catching in different ways to stress different combinations of muscles is very popular. Some throwing variations include: chest throw, overhead throw, under-hand throw, shoulder throw, diagonal swing, and backwards throw. Each one is unique and there are dozens of combinations, the point is that medicine balls offer lots of options to combine muscle actions in new ways. I don't think your training partner would appreciate you hurling a fifteen-pound dumbbell at him.

Combining upper and lower body muscles is vital for many benefits, including improved balance, coordination, core strength, and stability. Whichever throwing or catching style is chosen, the legs and core can be incorporated in different ways. Adding a lunge or squatting motion to the exercise can add power and is also good for sports related coordination. Throwing and catching on one leg can be fun too and, of course, is good for core strength and balance.

Many of the core benefits from medicine ball work come from twisting and bending the trunk while manipulating the ball. One basic core exercise is twisting the upper body side to side holding the ball against the chest. This is made progressively tougher by extending the arms, moving the ball further from the chest. A progression from here would be to swing the ball at different angles diagonally while moving from one side to the other. This is also the basis of many exercises benefiting rotational sports movements like baseball, golf, and tennis.

Adding a squat position to this upper body movement would bring the legs more into play, as would coordination with a walking lunge or hopping or jumping. When you combine several muscle groups in various planes of movement simultaneously it's important to proceed cautiously. Definitely use lighter medicine balls to begin with, giving time to observe how the body responds. The locations of certain aches and pains the next day can be surprising.

It's a common mistake to forgo basic weight training principles when incorporating medicine balls into a workout routine. The overload principle is basic to strengthening, but should be explored cautiously. A ten-pound ball may seem light in some directions but with twisting and throwing the overload may not go where it's expected. As this type of training is introduced the variability principle will be well addressed, however muscles tend to adapt quickly and further variation will be required for consistent progress. One concern that is easily overlooked with medicine ball training is the consideration that each side of the body gets equal attention. It's important not to favor one side over the other. Alternating left and right when possible, but also being sure to vary which side begins each set can help address this.

The combinations of exercises, angles, compound movements, and directions of forces all make medicine ball training fun, exciting and effective, but also make it risky and potentially dangerous. As always, try to apply a little common sense and take it slow at first.

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