

Get a Grip

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Nothing is more empowering than possessing a pair of sinewy forearms, bundled with thick veins that descend from your sleeves. Few things are more telling about a serious lifter than a pair of jacked forearms, but few things can be as potentially limiting in nailing big lifts than a lack of grip strength.

Big pulls, presses, and even squats, impose a significant demand on the body – rousing chunks of muscle, their corresponding motor units, and the joints they attach to - which permit movement, all must act synergistically to move the load through its desired range of motion. Well unless powerlifting associations add a seated tibial extension exercise to their list of events, count on the forearms as being included in every lift. Until that happens, you'll need a vise-like grip to ensure your numbers keep climbing on the three lifts.

Grip Anatomy

Whether you're trying to intimidate your daughter's boyfriend with an excessively firm handshake or are trying to shatter PRs, you're going to need to strengthen the wrist flexors. For brevity's sake, we'll keep this section as short as possible, because the wrist, forearm, and hand region is one that is very complex due to its structure which comprises many bones and webs of tendons and ligaments. The region is also incredibly innervated, which often causes problems, such as entrapments and impingements, and more specifically conditions such as carpal tunnel.

If you want to bolster your grip you'll have to strengthen the wrist flexor complex, which consists of two groups -- the primary wrist flexors, which include: the flexor carpi radialis, flexor carpi ulnaris, and the palmaris longus; and the secondary wrist flexors, consisting of: the flexor digitorum profundus and superficialis muscles and flexor pollicis longus.

Grip and Rip

The flexor carpi radialis is the muscle that's implicated in the popular cue of ripping the bar apart on the bench press. Originating from the medial epicondyle of the humerus (upper arm) and inserting into the bases of the second and third metacarpals (bones below the the index and middle fingers), it both flexes the wrist and controls radial deviation. Flexing these hard while attempting to rip the bar apart on the bench – which may actually happen if you're using the plastic encased standard bar with sand filled weights stored in your attic – will engage the lats more, thus furnishing a greater base of support for a big bench.

The flexor carpi ulnaris, which is composed of two heads: the humeral head, originating from the medial epicondyle of the humerus, and the ulnar head, originating from the proximal posterior ulna and the olecranon process of the ulna, which insert into the base of the wrist and the fifth metacarpal, which sits beneath the pinky finger. The flexor carpi ulnaris flexes the wrist and controls ulnar deviation. Flexing them hard along with the other wrist flexors, will help get the elbows back and down on a back squat – which helps engage the lats and core more, while it keeping the chest high. Most seasoned lifters know that an improper setup will usually end up in a missed lift, or worse yet an injury. Getting the elbows

back and down will help keep the torso erect during the movement, provided the squatter doesn't have weak lats.

The palmaris longus, the last of the primary wrist flexor group, flexes the hand and assists with wrist flexion, also originating from the medial epicondyle of the humerus, it inserts into both muscles at the surface of the hands – the palmar aponeurosis and the flexor retinaculum.

Not to be forgotten, the secondary wrist flexors, which aforementioned, aid with wrist flexion, include: the flexor digitorum profundus, originating from the ulna and interosseus membrane and inserting into the bases of the distal phalanges of the four fingers, flexes the fingers and assists with wrist flexion; the flexor digitorum superficialis, has three heads – the humeral head, the ulnar head, and the radial head, which originate from the medial epicondyle of the humerus, coronoid process of ulna, and the radius, respectively. All heads fan out and insert into both shafts of the medial phalanges of the four fingers, flexing them and assisting with wrist flexion. The last group, the flexor pollicis longus, originates from the radius and interosseus membrane and inserts into the base of the distal phalange of the thumb, which it flexes at its interphalangeal joint.

All groups work synergistically to facilitate wrist flexion and will work with the extensor muscles to stabilize the wrist in the handling big loads. For the sake of relevance and brevity, the extensor muscles won't be mentioned here, however, plan to see them covered in subsequent articles, as they are still very important.

How to train the wrist flexors

Movements such as rope pull ups, towel pull ups, and finishers such as dead hangs from a pull-up bar with a fully clenched hand will all challenge the grip. Inverted rows, with a towel or a cable rope draped over the bar will also fry the wrist flexors.

Rack Pulls

While offering little carryover to the deadlift movement, rack pulls, in addition to strengthening the upper back, will overload one's grip. If you decide to insert them program, perform following deadlifts or as the first or second exercise of the day, on weeks that you're not pulling from the floor. Consider purchasing a scalpel from a surgical supply store to remove callouses, which will get big and nasty, because you'll be doing rack pulls at supramaximal deadlift weights. You could keep the rack pull set-rep scheme similar to your deadlift set-rep scheme, or you could go with a few high rep sets to really pound the wrist flexors into submission.

Farmers Walks

Even if you're not lucky enough to train at a place like MetroFlex or IronSport, or don't have access to farmers walk bars, you can still derive a similar grip overloading effect by making a few simple adjustments. If you're at a gym, try taking a not so leisurely stroll with the heaviest dumbbells you can shrug for 15 reps. If you have a hex-bar, you can load it up, pick it up and take a walk with it. The same goes for an Olympic bar if you don't have a hex bar or dumbbells, like many people who train at home. If you have no choice but to go with the two latter routes, use a load that's roughly half of your actual or estimated deadlift max.

Kroc Rows

High rep dumbbell rows, popularized by legendary powerlifter, turned bodybuilder, Matt Kroczaleski, will not only hammer the back, but will slam the forearms as well if straps aren't used. Set up as you would for a dumbbell row or higher – such as leaning on the dumbbell rack for support, and perform as many reps as possible with the heaviest dumbbell at your gym. Use these as an accessory on your pull day, or if you're a bodybuilder, on back day as a finisher.

Hex Head Tuck Curls

Here's a little known lift, which if performed correctly, will target both wrist flexor groups. Grab a pair of lighter hex-headed dumbbells. Firmly grasp the head, with your elbows at your sides, performing what is essentially a reverse curl, which will also hit the brachioradialis muscle, and flex the wrist as hard as you can once you reach full elbow flexion at the top of the movement. Ideally, the dumbbell should make contact with the bottom of your forearm. Again, do high reps on these as an accessory movement or as a finisher in a body part training split. If after the set, you scream for the gym staff to call 9-1-1, you've probably done them right.