

Looks hard, but anyone can do it: Here's how to master the pull-up

Train the right way by focusing on proper technique

I've always loved pull-ups, partly out of spite. There is a common fitness refrain that women can't do them, and I don't like to be told I can't do something — especially if the reason is my gender. As a teenager, I pushed lawn-mowers and hauled rocks just to show that being a girl didn't mean I was weak.

I love how pull-ups make me feel — powerful, strong. There's nothing like the feeling of lifting yourself up. Pull-ups are also beautiful for their simplicity. They require nothing more than a bar, and engage at least a dozen muscles, from the lats all the way to the glutes. Experts say they improve upper body strength, shoulder mobility and core stability, while helping to hone coordination too. Doing a pull-up is "an amazing feeling," said Chilasa King, a powerlifter and coach at LiftedMBK in New York. The exercise boosts confidence and turns heads at the gym, she said. "It's a simple exercise that's really hard to do."

Therein lies the pull-up paradox: Pull-ups are simple, but hard, and many people who think they can't do one really could, if they put in the effort and time. Everybody has a good chance of achieving a pull-up if they train for it, said Meghan Callaway, a strength coach based in Vancouver, Canada, and creator of The Ultimate Pull-Up Program. Most people who fail to master the pull-up struggle not because they are physically incapable, but because they are not training in the right way, she said. The trick is to focus on proper technique and approach your training with patience and deliberateness.

FOCUS ON FORM The first thing to understand is that pull-ups are a full body exercise. "A lot of people think of a pull-up purely as an upper body exercise and they neglect what is going on from the chest down," Callaway said. Your body should be rigid, not slack. What would be easier to move, Callaway asked, a stiff board, or an equally weighted floppy sandbag? If your torso, hips and lower body are rigid, it makes it a lot easier to lift them than if they're dead weight. (Kipping pull-ups, done by swinging your legs for momentum, are a different exercise altogether, she said.) Grab the

bar slightly greater than shoulder width with your palms facing away from you. (Holding your palms toward you would be a chin-up, a different — and most people say easier — exercise.) Your body should be aligned in a relatively straight line with your feet just slightly ahead of your body so you're in a very slight arc. It's better for the bar to be just within reach on your tip toes, but if you're doing them in a doorway, it's okay to bend your knees with your feet out behind you, Callaway said.

To initiate the pull-up, move your shoulder blades toward your spine (think of it as the opposite of shrugging) while simultaneously driving your elbows down toward your ribs. Keep your abs and glutes tight to maintain a rigid body position. As you pull up, don't reach up with your chin, Callaway said, but instead keep your chin tucked, your neck in a neutral position and your eyes looking straight ahead.

PRACTICE THE COMPONENTS: Not everyone can do a pull-up the first time. Even before you can do a complete pull-up, you can break the movement down into its component parts and train for each of them. Use these four exercises to help get stronger and more skilled at the essential parts of the pull-up motion.

BAR HANGS: The first step is to learn how to hang in a rigid position, rather than flaccidly. King has beginners practice hanging by grabbing the bar, engaging their abs and glutes to make their body stiff like a board, and then holding for 30 to 45 seconds.

— SCAPULA PULL-UPS: These are a way to practice the initial pull-up movement. Start by hanging on a bar and then engage the muscles in your mid and upper back to move your shoulder blades in toward your spine. As you do this, you'll feel yourself elevating just a tiny amount. Hold for a moment in this elevated position, then slowly lower yourself to the starting position. Don't bend your elbows. Your arms should be straight for the entire motion.

— ECCENTRIC PULL-UPS: Begin at the top position of a pull-up with your head above the bar (stand on a chair to get up there if you need to) and then slowly lower yourself to a hanging position using a controlled,



fluid motion.

— INVERTED ROWS: This exercise strengthens the back and improves shoulder mobility. Position yourself underneath a weight bar as if about to do a bench press. But instead of lying on a bench, hang from the bar, your heels on the floor. Hold your body in a straight, rigid line and pull yourself up, initiating the movement using your back muscles, rather than your arms. Return to the starting position in a slow, controlled motion. Imagine moving your shoulder blades away from your spine and around your rib cage.

TAKE YOUR TIME: "Be patient," King said. Getting your first pull-up "takes time and a lot of consistency; it doesn't happen overnight." Consistency is crucial, she said. "There is no way around this. You have to work at it, week after week and month after month." For Casey Johnson, a health and science writer, pull-ups were just one part of a larger quest to get stronger. She'd been weight lifting for about a year before she could finally do one, but it was worth it for the sense of accomplishment in mastering this quintessen-

tial show of strength. "No one is required to do pull-ups," she said. "I have long arms and I'm relatively big, which are both challenges." It's true that pull-ups are easier for some people than for others. "In general, as mass goes up, strength to weight ratios go down," said Greg Nuckols, founder of StrongerByScience.com and a powerlifter who's held three world records. A tall person is likely to have more mass to pull up than a shorter person, even if they are similarly built. Some may never be able to manage a pull-up, no matter how long they try, and others might decide it's not worth it.

I will never set any pull-up records with my long arms and legs and taller-than-average height. But I do have a few advantages: Good upper body strength from years of cross-country skiing and not too much middle-aged pudge. I still have to work at pull-ups, but the payoff is deeply satisfying. "Pulling yourself up onto something — a bar, over a fence, up a wall — makes you feel like a superhero," Callaway said. Not only that, she added, it also makes the monkey bars at the nearby playground a little more fun. —*The New York Times*

Flossing your teeth: Why do my gums bleed? Should I brush or floss first? Is there a right way?

You would think you know how to floss your teeth by now. But here's the thing: You might be doing it wrong



Flossing is an important habit one should have to get rid of plaque, that sticky, whitish biofilm of bacteria that forms on teeth.

When plaque is allowed to accumulate along the gum line, the bacteria can trigger inflammation in the gums and lead to gingivitis or gum inflammation, said Dr Haw Sue Yi, a dental surgeon with SingHealth Polyclinics. Those red and bleeding gums you might have? Those are signs of gingivitis.

"If left untreated, gingivitis can progress into periodontitis, where there is loss of supporting bone, which can result in shaky teeth," said Dr Haw. And it doesn't take long for plaque to form, mature and harden into tartar — just 24 to 72 hours — after which gingivitis starts to develop, she said. Tartar is much harder to remove than plaque and can only be done at the dentist.

Got other questions on flossing? Here are the answers.

DO I FLOSS OR BRUSH FIRST?

It might be a better idea to floss first, then brush your teeth, said Dr Haw. Doing so "allows the debris to be removed from the interdental spaces and subsequently, brushed off", she said. "Flossing first also means that a

larger clean tooth surface area will be exposed to the fluoride content in the toothpaste."

HOW SHOULD I BE FLOSSING?

Don't hold your piece of floss straight and just go up and down with it. And never snap the floss onto the gums as it can hurt them, said Dr Haw.

Instead, curve the floss around the base of the tooth in a C-shape, and gently use an up-and-down motion to clean the surface of the tooth, she said. "Make sure you reach slightly below the gum line."

WHAT IS THE BEST TIME TO FLOSS?

At night — and the good news is, you only need to floss once daily. Right before bedtime is best because "our salivary flow is reduced when we sleep", said Dr Haw. This means that the acid produced by plaque bacteria isn't washed away by saliva and the overnight exposure to the acid bath can result in more decay.

WHY DO MY GUMS BLEED WHEN I FLOSS?

It is normal as long as the bleeding stops by

the time you've finished flossing and brushing. The bleeding could be caused by a rough or improper flossing technique. Or your gums just aren't used to the stimulation created by flossing.

However, don't let the bleeding deter you from flossing the area (if you've ascertained it isn't caused by dental or health issues). Avoiding flossing can "ultimately become a vicious cycle and result in the further buildup of plaque or tartar", said Dr Haw.

Keep at it and you should be able to floss without seeing blood after seven to 10 days. But "if you find that your gums bleed frequently, make an appointment to visit a dentist", said Dr Haw. It may be due to gum disease such as gingivitis or periodontitis.

I DON'T THINK I'M DOING IT RIGHT

There are alternatives to the dental floss such as interdental brushes, said Dr Haw. These are small, narrow brushes that come in different widths to suit the size of the gaps between your teeth. In fact, if you have "black triangles" (large interdental spaces between your teeth that look like, well, black triangles), interdental brushes may be more effective for you, she said. —*CNA*

Almost half of skin 'bleaching' creams contain mercury, review finds

An alarming number of skin lightening creams on the market may contain illegal levels of mercury.

Researchers analyzed over 100 popular skin-lightening or so-called "whitening" products sold on platforms such as Amazon and eBay for mercury. They found that almost half of these cosmetics contained mercury above legal limits. As a heavy metal, mercury is highly toxic to humans and can cause severe symptoms. Researchers are urging people to stop using skin-lightening products to avoid mercury exposure. Skin-lightening and skin "whitening" products (SLPs) are available worldwide. A recent review of these products currently on the market has found that many still contain dangerous levels of mercury. Mercury in cosmetics, especially in skin-lightening creams, is not unheard of. The chemical is widely used in such products due to its ability to suppress melanin production, which gives color to the skin, and lighten hyperpigmentation such as dark spots, freckles, and blemishes. Trusted Source of mercury. Mercury in cosmetics, especially in skin-lightening creams, is not unheard of. The chemical is widely used in such products due to its ability to suppress melanin production, which gives color to the skin, and lighten hyperpigmentation such as dark spots, freckles, and blemishes. Trusted Source.

However, mercury is highly toxic to human health. The Zero Mercury Working Group (ZMWG) analyzed 271

SLPs from over 40 online platforms, including Amazon, eBay, and Aliexpress. They found that 129 of the products tested contained mercury levels exceeding 1 ppm, the international legal limit set by the Minamata Convention on Mercury. "We have conducted this type of sampling three times already, so I would not say we were very surprised by the findings," Elena Lymberidi-Settimo, policy manager at the Zero Mercury Campaign, told Medical News Today.

"However, it is rather worrying that these creams are found to be available, over and over again with very high mercury, in more platforms around the world, in all regions, and in comparison to our last survey," she said.

The report was published by the European Environmental Bureau. Stay informed on skin remedies with our newsletter Open your inbox to care tips, research, and treatment updates on skin conditions such as eczema, acne, and more. Enter your email Your privacy is important to us The dangers of mercury Regular use of SLPs containing mercury reduces resistance to bacterial and fungal infections, rashes, skin discoloration, and blotchy skin. —*Agencies*

