Weighing Exercise Risk Versus Benefit

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FOR ANY GIVEN EXERCISE, there are risks and benefits that are unique for each client. Weighing risk versus benefit is one way to guide yourself to what exercises will be safe for your clients while still maximizing gains. Whether it is flexing or maintaining neutral spine, performing exercises behind the neck or in front, using plyometrics or not, the debate continues as to what is proper technique and what exercises should or should not be done. Complicating this choice is the realization that the safest exercise is not always the best exercise for your client. If it was, everyone would be performing limited range of motion, low weight, super-slow training.

Assuming you have already completed all health screening and appropriate assessments, helped your client define their goals, finished a needs-analysis of what is required to reach those goals, and periodized their program, the next step is a process of selecting exercises.

Strength and conditioning professionals need to have a step-by-step process to selecting exercises; otherwise exercise selection can take on a “what’s the difference” quality. There are no straight answers as to which exercises are appropriate or not. Appropriateness depends on the client, their goals, condition, limitations, and abilities. It also depends on the risk of that exercise to the client, and if that risk is worth taking or not. Use the following questions to help guide your exercise selection. The sample scenarios outlined here are shown as examples of how the process works.

Scenario #1—
George is 43. He wants to build muscle and lose fat weight so he will look good for his 25-year high school reunion. He is relatively healthy; but after a posture assessment, you find that his head is forward, he has round shoulders, and increased lumbar lordosis.

1. What exercise or particular technique are you considering?
Behind the neck shoulder presses.

2. What risks are involved in this exercise?
It can promote “head forward” postural position, possible bruising of sixth/seventh cervical vertebrae, possible injuries to rotator cuff, etc.

3. What benefits does this exercise have in regard to helping my client achieve their goals?
George wants to increase the size of his deltoids and this exercise could aid in deltoid hypertrophy. Jennifer wants to compete in Olympic-style weightlifting, and the behind the neck press is an exercise used in the progression of weightlifting abilities.

4. Are the benefits unique to this exercise, or can I choose another exercise that carries less risk?
For George, this exercise may exacerbate his existing poor postural position. Other exercises, i.e., dumbbell shoulder presses or ma-
chine shoulder presses, would serve the same purpose yet carry less risk. For Jennifer, seeking to compete in weightlifting, it could be argued that the behind the neck press does have a unique benefit as a weightlifting progression.

5. Is the risk to my client worth taking?
For George, solely seeking hypertrophy, the risk outweighs the benefit, so this exercise is not worthwhile. For Jennifer, seeking to compete in weightlifting, the risks are probably outweighed by the benefits.

6. If I determine that I should choose an exercise that carries greater risk, how can I minimize that risk?
First, help Jennifer acquire the shoulder flexibility needed; then teach her proper technique and use very light weights to start.

Using the behind the neck shoulder press as an example, it can be argued that this exercise either should or should not be done. The solution to this question, as was shown through the use of the process above, is that it depends. Anytime you are unsure about using an exercise or particular technique, ask yourself these questions and determine for yourself if the risk outweighs the benefit.

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