The Lat Pulldown

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I hear a lot of mixed messages about the lat pulldown. Just how much of a potential problem is the posterior lat pulldown as described in the June ‘97 issue of Strength and Conditioning?

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There have been several recent attempts to classify the posterior lat pulldown (along with numerous other exercises) an unsafe movement. Many studies that are used to reach this conclusion are quoted out of context.

Gross et al. identified the wide-grip bench press, supine fly, and lat pulldown as activities that could cause shoulder injury. These exercises may force the arm into an abducted and externally rotated position. However, when surveyed, very few individuals could recall a specific event that resulted in a symptomatic shoulder.

There may be other reasons for injury, including degenerative processes of the joint, improper technique in lifting, and the mode of training (body building vs. powerlifting). Studies by Maffulli and Mikhali, and another by Neviaser, reviewed strength training injuries, but none identified the posterior lat pulldown as a culprit.

Some authors suggest the posterior lat pulldown be eliminated because it has no functional transfer to everyday activity. There are numerous other exercises that have no transfer to everyday movement, yet they do promote muscular development and strength which may be applied to everyday or sport-specific movements.

Any exercise can be performed properly or improperly. Before condemning a movement, let’s be sure the lift is done properly.

Extreme neck flexion as depicted in the referenced article in S&C is not an example of proper technique. In an informal survey I conducted locally, no one assumes this posture in this lift. The current trend of employing excessive trunk hyperextension with the anterior lat pulldown may be a more serious concern than the neck flexion example used in the posterior pulldown.

In other words, performing either movement improperly may lead to injury, while using proper technique may avoid injury. Our focus, as strength and conditioning professionals, must be on proper instruction and strict supervision. In many cases it is not the exercise, but how it is performed, that will lead to injury.

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