Muscle for the Middle

Solutions and Substitutions for Mid-Life Muscle Building

Mark Brown M.Ed

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When did we become the old ones in the weight room?

For those of us dipping a toe into middle age, we are fortunate to be part of the first generation of exercisers exposed to the great value of strength training. Prior to the 1990s, the weight room was reserved for bodybuilders, powerlifters and strength athletes. Sports like basketball, baseball and boxing avoided the iron for fear of becoming slow and "muscle bound", and the average man or woman jogged or did aerobics while living in fear of getting "too big".

Luckily, research has shown we can build muscular strength and endurance, increase bone density and lower our body fat percentage with simple, consistent strength training. Most importantly, science tells us our bodies can continue to reap these rewards at any age. Muscle is not reserved for the young!

However, as we view our current landscape, mainstream fitness information IS reserved for the young. Glossy muscle magazines have migrated to the internet, where content is often more about inspiration than information. The middle-aged exerciser in search of workout ideas will have to scroll through dozens of channels featuring "trainers" who may be closer to their children's age. Worse, a few minutes of viewing will quickly reveal routines designed to garner views and impress the audience, leaving little time to teach or offer any applicable training advice to the average individual.

Unfortunately, a quick 180 degree turn doesn't improve our view. Instead, many in the fitness community suggest any of us with a hint of grey hair pick up some colorful, plastic weights and perform workouts sitting in a chair. While we may have some miles, we also have some muscles, and this crowd is not ready to sit! For most of us, we can still move forward in our muscle building journey, provided we make smart choices and respect our bodies. We are still playing by the same rules as our younger gym friends, we just need to adjust the fine print in the rule book.

When it comes to building muscle in an effective and efficient manner, there is no substitute for progressive overload using big, compound movements, such as squats and bench presses. These lifts involve multiple joints and muscles, allowing heavier weights to be used. In addition, the ability to safely perform

these types of movements in the gym will improve our ability to function better in daily life. Pressing ourselves up from the floor to lift a grandchild overhead is the type of move we train for and live for, so if our workouts do not help us in this direction, we need a new map!

The following substitutions offer solutions for us to continue training compound lifts for movement patterns that must remain strong if we are to continue to maintain function and strength for the rest of our lives.

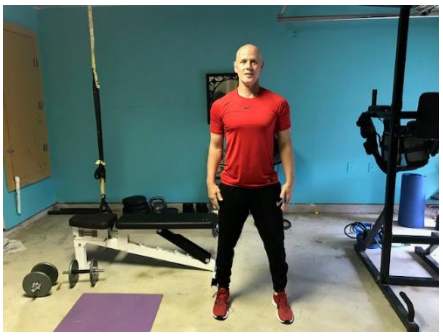
MINOR MODIFICATIONS FOR MAJOR MUSCLE—THE MOVES

SQUATS:

Strength coaches have longed called the squat the "king of all exercises" in reference to the large amount of muscles recruited for the lift. Squatting low and standing back up with a barbell across the back requires every muscle of the lower body, as well as many of the upper body, to work together in a coordinated movement. This ability is crucial in athletic endeavors and daily life. Jumping for a rebound or getting up from the toilet both require a squat. Simply put, healthy individuals must continue to practice this move!

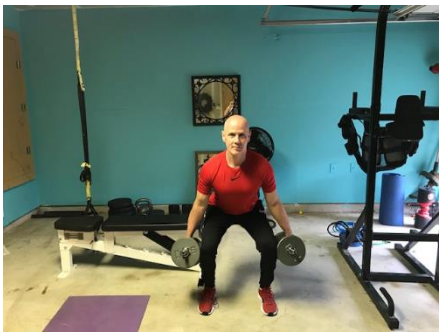
Why then, do many mid-life muscle builders stop squatting? In many cases, the act of placing a loaded bar across the back in a traditional barbell squat position begins to become more risk than reward. Years of sitting and screen-time has left many with limited shoulder mobility, making proper barbell position uncomfortable, or in some cases impossible. In addition, for those with disc injuries in the spine, the compressive load of the barbell on the back is considered contraindicated by most in the medical field. Finally, many in mid-life are struggling to find time to workout and have moved to working out at a home gym, where, in many cases, a 7-foot long Olympic barbell may not be an option. Fortunately, there are numerous squat options that can be adapted to your body type, injury history and available equipment. Great news: you are bending your hips, knees and ankles, you are squatting!

Squat Options:



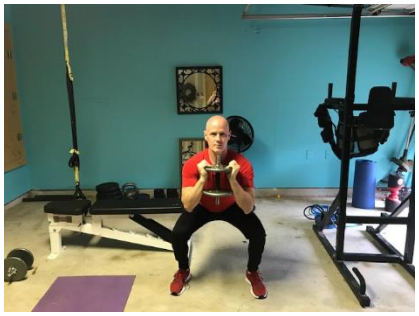
Ready Position

Bodyweight Squat



2 DB Squat

1 DB Squat



Goblet Squat

*Begin with feet approximately shoulder width apart. Toes may turn out slightly if that is more comfortable.

*Keeping the chest lifted, initiate the squat by flexing hips, knees and ankles at the same time.

*While maintaining a neutral spine, lower to approximately 90 degrees at the knee. Individual range will vary, go as low as you can without rounding the upper or lower back. From the bottom position, smoothly return to the top.

Tips: The 1 dumbbell squat is a great choice if you have limited equipment. It is also a practical squat, as you will train the act of lifting objects from the floor.

The goblet squat will activate the core to a higher degree as you work to maintain an upright posture throughout the repetition. The unique holding position will also allow challenge you with a lighter weight.

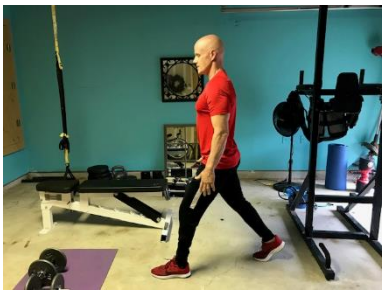
If you are in front of a mirror, you should always see your eyes and chest in any of these variations.

Lunges:

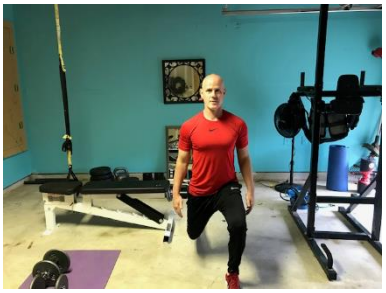
While the squat may be called the “king of all exercises”, the lunge offers a strong fight for that title in both sport and life. If we really think about it, how often do we find both feet lined up perfectly beneath us? Walking, running and climbing all take place with one foot in front of the other, making the lunge an amazing exercise to train the balance and single leg strength needed to perform these tasks.

From a standpoint of muscle fiber recruitment, the lunge, like the squat, requires the quadriceps, glutes, and hamstrings to work together. In addition, the act of stabilizing the femur of the lead leg requires tremendous help from the inner thighs and glute medius (side of your butt!). In fact, studies show that the inner/outer thigh machines at the gym do not involve nearly as much “inner/outer thigh” as the lunge, giving us another big reason to program this movement. As with the traditional squat, barbell placement on the back may again be limited by shoulder mobility, existing disc injury and even balance. If that is the case, we can incorporate the following options to receive the same great benefits:

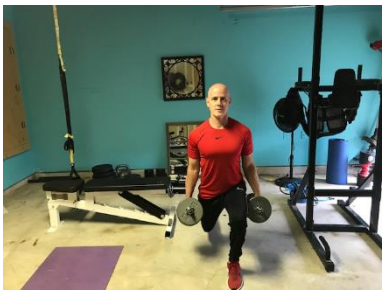
Lunge Options:



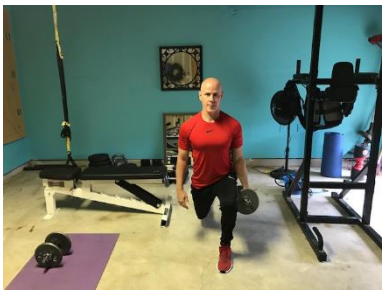
Lunge Ready Position



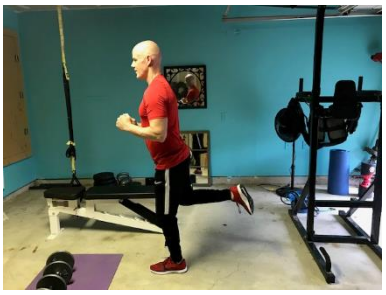
Lunge Bottom



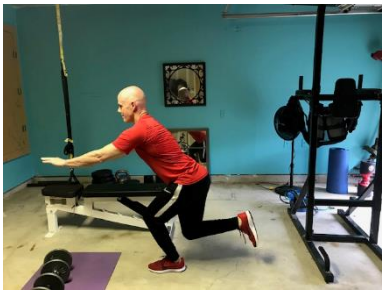
2 DB Lunge Bottom



1 DB Lunge Bottom



Balance Lunge Top



Balance Lunge Bottom

*Begin in a split stance, with feet shoulder width apart.

*Keeping the majority of your weight on the front leg, lower slowly and attempt to reach a right angle at both knees.

*Maintaining upright posture, slowly return to the starting position.

Tips: Maintain a wide base to ensure balance, the front and back leg should never be on the same line.

The descent on a lunge should be vertical, avoid excessive forward and back lean.

The 1 DB lunge will challenge the core as you work to maintain stability with the off-set load of the single dumbbell.

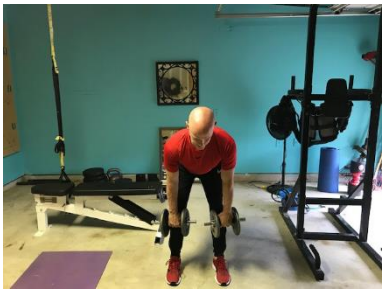
On the balance lunge, you may keep a hand on a chair or bar in front of you. Since you are not loading the spine with external resistance, the hips and knees are free to travel where they need to maintain balance. Don’t feel locked in or limited by a need for perfect form, let your body figure it out!

Hinge:

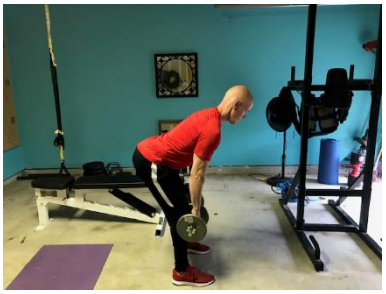
The lower body hinge, or hip extension, is often practiced as a Romanian, or semi-stiff legged deadlift and executed with the barbell. The primary muscles are the glutes and hamstrings, with additional assistance coming from the lower back. Maintaining strength in these muscles will promote better balance between the back and front of the body, which is critical for injury prevention, especially to the knee. Away from the gym, this movement allows us to bend to pick up objects when we are unable to flex the knees. While some lifters may be able to handle heavy weights on the barbell, many others will be safe and successful with the following variations:

Hinge Options:

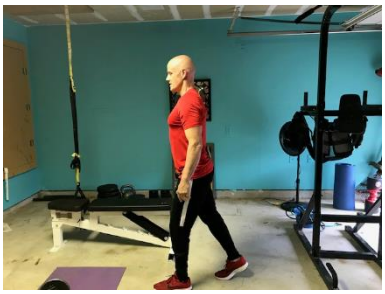
DB Deadlift Ready Position



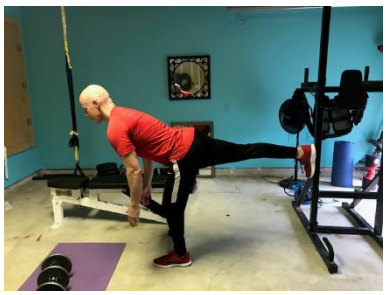
DB Deadlift Bottom



DB Deadlift Side View



Singe Leg Hinge Ready



Single Leg Hinge Bottom

1 DB Single Leg Hinge

*On DB deadlift, begin the movement by hinging, or reaching back with the hips.

*Continue reaching with your hips for the wall behind you, keeping the dumbbells close to the thighs.

*While maintaining long, neutral spine, lower the bells until you feel a stretch in the hamstrings. Do not attempt to increase range by rounding the back!

*Press feet firmly to the floor and smoothly return to the top position, with ears, shoulders and hips in a vertical line.

*On the single leg hinge, tip forward at the hips and slowly reach up and back with the trail leg.

*Aim the heel to the ceiling, beginning with a range of motion that you can control.

*Pause slightly at the top of the movement, then slowly return to start position.

Tips: The dumbbell deadlift can be performed in front of a wall, giving you a target to reach for with your hips.

Practice the single leg hinge next to a chair, leaving a hand on top, while you develop confidence and skill in the move.

The ground foot is often the key to the single leg hinge. Attempt to keep the entire foot in solid contact with the floor. Most of us fall to the outside of that foot, combat this by actively pressing the big toe into the floor.

Upper Body Horizontal Press:

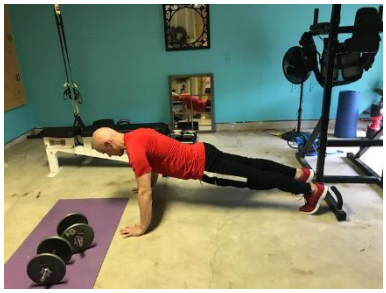
The horizontal pressing pattern is typically done with the barbell bench press, which, for many of us was the first lift learned on our muscle building journey. The bench press meets our criteria of training multiple muscle groups by challenging the chest, front deltoids and triceps. For many, however, the fixed hand position on the barbell can play havoc on the shoulder joint. Combine this with our desire to push close to maximal weights so we can answer “how much do you bench?” with pride and we are suddenly courting orthopedic disaster. For many the barbell bench press is the first big lift our bodies said “no” to, but we cannot say no to this pattern. On the most basic level, every time we press our bodies from the floor, we are “benching”. Explore the

following exercises until you find an option that does not cause pain in the shoulder joint.

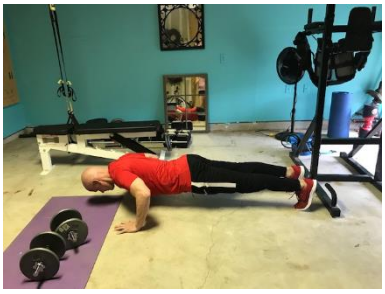
Horizontal Pressing Options:

Bench Push-Up Top

Bench Push-Up Bottom



Floor Push-Up Top



Floor Push-Up Bottom

Floor Press Bottom

Floor Press Top

Single Arm Floor Press

*On all horizontal presses the hands should be positioned at chest level, under the body, and not at shoulder level. Keeping the hands under the body will keep the shoulders in a safe and strong position.

*For push-up variations, begin with hands under the body, with fingertips about shoulder level.

*Maintain tension in the entire body by contracting the abdomen, glutes and thighs.

*Lower slowly to the floor or bench, keeping the head, hips and heels in one line.

*Smoothly change directions and return to the starting point, with arms extended but not locked.

*For the floor press, begin with the back of the arm against the floor.

*With control, press the dumbbell above the center of the chest, then return to the bottom position, lightly touching the floor with the working arm.

Tips: Bench push-ups are preferable to kneeling push-ups, as the longer lever will recruit more core muscles than the kneeling version.

If you are able to do more than 20 push-ups on the floor, elevate your feet on the bench with your hands on the floor!

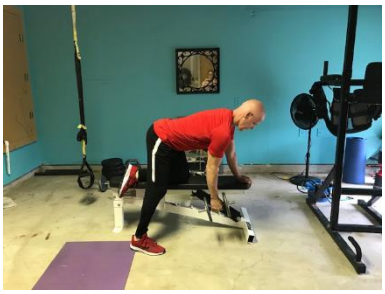
The single arm floor option will challenge core and shoulder stability to balance the offset load.

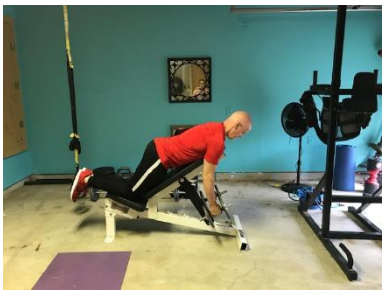
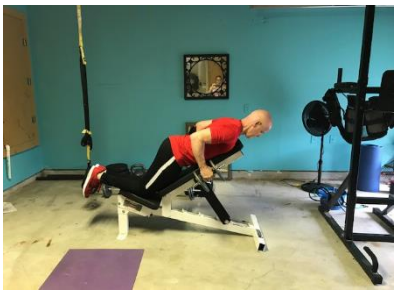
Upper Body Pulling:

Upper body pulling exercises are done to build strength in the upper back. This motion is also invaluable when it comes to maintaining and improving posture, as these muscles help us to pull our shoulders back and away from the rounded, slumped shoulder posture that has become prevalent in our society.

Bent-over rows can be an excellent remedy, but when performed conventionally, both barbell rows, and some dumbbell row variations require a strong low back, as well as good kinesthetic, or spatial awareness, for the user to maintain proper spinal alignment. To safely combat these issues while appropriately taxing the upper back, consider adding these moves to your back training:

Pulling Options:





*Begin all rowing motions with a neutral spine and avoid rounding in the upper and lower back throughout the movement.

*Initiate the row by pulling your shoulder blades to your spine.

*Attempt to “stay where you start” with the rest of the body, keeping the hips still and minimizing excess movement in the upper body.

Tips: Remember that your head should be an extension of your spine, try to maintain alignment from head to hips!

A brief pause in the top, or contracted position, will increase the effectiveness of the movement. This static hold is also a great way to make a lighter weight more challenging if you have limited equipment.

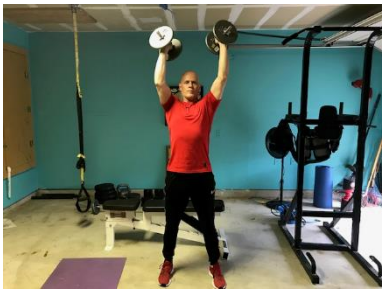
Upper Body Vertical Pressing:

For many mid-life muscle builders, overhead pressing can become problematic in the shoulder joint. For those with rotator cuff injuries or shoulder impingement, the strict vertical pressing pattern may be hampered by pain and compromised range of motion. As the shoulder is quite a delicate and tricky area, pain in these movements may call for professional therapy to regain function.

Too often, the exerciser simply decides to quit lifting overhead. As a short-term solution, this can be a good move, but long-term, we are avoiding doing something we need to do! Strong and mobile shoulders are needed to lift household objects overhead or even simply taking off our shirt. Fortunately, the mobility of the shoulder allows us to explore some less traditional options that allow us to continue to train overhead motions.

Vertical Pressing Options:

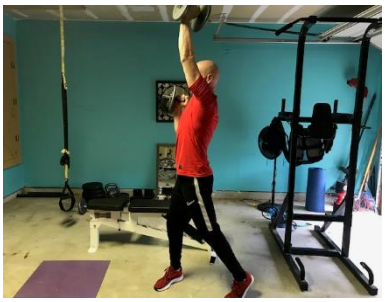
DB Press Bottom



DB Press Top

1 DB Press Top

Rotational Press Bottom



Rotational Press Top

*For most of us, holding the dumbbells in a neutral (palms facing each other) grip, will be more shoulder friendly. The beauty of the dumbbell is that the grip does not have to be fixed in one position, experiment with hand placement until you find your pain free lifting position. The single arm press affords even more freedom of motion and may be appropriate for those with imbalances or pre-existing conditions in one shoulder.

*Begin with a strong, balanced foot position. Tighten the core and keep those muscles engaged throughout, as they play a crucial role in bracing the body in the overhead position and, in the case of the rotational press, transferring power from the lower to the upper body.

*Extend the arms overhead smoothly, pause briefly at the top, and return with control to the start position.

*On the rotational press, begin with a strong pivot of the working leg and, in one motion, drive the dumbbell overhead on a slight angle. Lower the weight by pivoting back to the starting point and quickly reverse the movement the other direction.

Tips: A slow lifting tempo will increase the challenge with a lighter weight. If you have a history of shoulder, neck or back issues, this may be a smart choice.

For a more athletic feel, turn the move into a “push press”, by dipping slightly at the knees and using momentum to drive the weight quickly to the top.

The total body coordination of the rotational press make it a great choice for golfers, tennis players and throwing athletes who need rotational power from the ground up to throw or strike a ball.

Putting the Moves in Motion

I hate to break the bad news, but the perfect workout routine does not exist. Every one of us brings to the table a unique combination of physiological and psychological variables. Many of these variables change daily as we navigate adult life. Sleep, stress and nutrition will impact exercise performance and results and, if we answer honestly, rarely do we get high marks in all three categories on the same day. These floating variables make it difficult to truly judge the effectiveness of a workout routine. After all, the greatest program design is worthless if diet and sleep habits look like those of a college student on spring break.

With so many options, it can be easy, and even fun, to follow an expert's "best program" or an actor's routine, but what they are really providing is a look at a routine that worked well for that individual, at a specific time and place. Without knowing details of your individual physiology and lifestyle, we are best served by working with strength training principles that will allow the exerciser some control of the workout design. The following guidelines will enable you to better construct and organize your own personal workouts, so that you can feel confident constructing routines that fit your lifestyle.

How often? For the average exerciser, research has shown little difference in 2 vs. 3 weight training sessions each week. For adequate muscle recovery, try to schedule 48-72 hours between workouts for the same muscle groups. This may take the shape of 2-4 lifting sessions each week. Your recovery can be improved by better sleeping habits and nutrition, so science has a hard time nailing down an exact formula. Learn to accept that living in the real world, you may have some weeks where you have more or less time between workouts. While this may

not be ideal, hey, workout when you can, as life usually has a way of providing extra rest days when we least expect it.

How Heavy? For mid-life muscle, we need to leave the 1-3 rep maximal lifts to our kids and become comfortable working in a slightly higher repetition range than we may have used in the past. We should still strive for improvements in weights lifted or repetitions completed, but the muscles, tendons and joints will appreciate harder work with a slightly lighter weight.

What constitutes light? For most, selecting a weight that allows between 12-15 well executed reps should provide a sufficient but safe load. Once that 15th rep becomes easy, simply increase the weight by the smallest increment possible and work back up to 15. If your physical limitations or available weight does not allow an increase, simply slow your repetition speed and that light weight will feel heavy!

What Order? Always attempt to sequence your workout to begin with "large" muscles first. Performing any of the lifts shown here prior to smaller moves, like biceps curls or triceps extensions, will ensure the majority of your energy is being used for the most important exercises.

How Fast? For most of us, a smooth, controlled repetition speed will be ideal. There is no need for extremes on either end of the speed spectrum. If you are able to use 2-3 seconds to both lift and lower the resistance, you are good to go!

Sample Circuit Workout:

Below is a suggested sequence with movements from each of the patterns highlighted in the book. If the move listed does not work well for you, simply plug in another exercise from that category.

Circuit #1

Squat:

Bodyweight Squat 20 reps

Lunge:

2DB Alternating Reverse Lunge 16 reps

Hinge:

2DB Deadlift 12 reps

Horizontal Press:

Push-up 15 reps

Pulling:

1 arm row on bench 15 reps per arm

Vertical Press:

Neutral Grip DB Press 12 reps

Arms:

2DB Biceps Curl 15 reps

Core:

Plank hold 30 seconds

Perform the circuit with as little rest as possible between exercises. Once you complete the entire circuit, rest 1-2 minutes and repeat, or move on the Circuit #2.

Circuit #2

Squat:

1DB Low Hold 20 reps

Lunge:

Bodyweight Balance 12 reps per leg

Hinge:

Single leg hinge, with our without weight, 12 reps per leg

Horizontal Pressing:

2B Floor Press 15 reps

Pulling:

Chest Supported Row 12 Reps

Vertical Pressing:

1DB Press 12 reps per arm

Arms:

1 DB Overhead Triceps Extension 15 reps

Core:

Side Plank 15 seconds per side

Perform each exercise consecutively, with as little rest as possible between each set. Once the circuit is completed, rest, then repeat if desired.

The above circuits could be done on the same day. Complete each one time then, as you fee stronger, work each circuit 2-3 times.

Another effective strategy would be using one workout each day, building up to three total rounds.

Stay Strong!

Strength training is one of our best methods available to living a longer and stronger life. Birthdays should not limit us in our workout, only ask us to make smarter choices. Always be prepared to change exercise selection and routines on the fly, as we respect how our body may be feeling as we begin our workout that day.

Barbells and dumbbells are tools to build strength, but you are the architect, ultimately in charge of how those tools are best used. I hope the information here helps you continue your strong path in building muscle for the middle and beyond.

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