

Pull-Ups- Conquering the Challenge

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Adding pull-ups to your workout requires little equipment, but a lot of effort. And, the effort is well worth it. It's by far one of the best upper-body exercises you can do for strength, power, and definition. Following the tools and ideas below will help you conquer one of the most challenging and beneficial exercises in the gym.

Pull-Ups Versus Chin-Ups

One of the most popular questions about Pull-ups is when is a pull-up a pull-up. It doesn't really matter, as long as we are talking about the same thing. The pull-up or chin up is the strength training exercise in which you hang from a steel bar with outstretched hands, and then pull you body up to a pre-determined position (when your chin is over the bar).

Lat Pulldowns aren't the same

Another popular question is whether pull-ups are the same as Lat Pulldowns . In theory, the muscles involved in both movements are similar. However, in practice, they are not the same. Simply put, Pull-ups require much more effort and force you to work harder than doing Lat Pulldowns.

Doing a Pull-up is definitely a difficult exercise, and may help explain why most strength experts support its use over Lat Pulldowns. Especially, when your goal is to develop strength and size in the upper back muscles ("Lats").

There's no doubt that Pull-ups are a challenging lift. In fact, a significant percentage of the population cannot perform even a single pull up with their own bodyweight. Now, this is no cause for concern of feeling inadequate, as there are ways you can overcome this challenge. And, if you are able to perform pull-ups, but are not making progress, then we have some techniques that you can use to break through your plateau.

Listed below are three levels of progression for Pull-ups. Match the level with what best suits your current level of competency with Pull-ups and learn what you can do to improve your Pull-up performance.

YOU CAN'T EVEN DO 1 PULL-UP (Level 1)

I could talk at length about the factors that increase the difficulty e.g. longer arm levers, and you may find solace in these excuses. But, since you have decided to master the pull-up challenge, I won't waste your time. Instead let's get started.

Step #1

Warm-up set: Take an under-hand grip on the Lat Pulldown machine with your palms facing you and arms shoulder width apart. Select a load on this machine that equates about 50% of your bodyweight and perform 10 reps.

Work sets: Now place a bench or similar under the pull-up bar. Take the same grip on the bar and jump up so that your chin is over the bar. Lower down in a smooth, constant speed. At first you may find you enter a weak joint angle at which time your lowering speed is accelerated. Instead, aim to alter this such that your lowering speed is constant. Start with about a 3 second count. If this is easy add an extra second per rep until you reach your limit. Stop after 10 reps. When you can do 10 reps of at least a 10 second lowering speed, move on to Step 2. This may take a few weeks.

Step #2

Warm-up set: as above

Work sets: Take a partner with you to the pull up bar. Have them help you do the lifting part -

push from the back, lift at the waist, and lift at your ankles - whatever. You do all the work in the lowering, but use only a 3 second count at a constant speed. You want to save all your energy for the lift. How much help does the partner give? You want the lift phase completed between 2-4 seconds. Any faster than this and the training partner is doing too much work. Any slower than this and the lifter is working too hard.

Once you can do the first full rep by yourself, only have the training partner come in on the rep that you are obviously not going to repeat. Once you have reached the ability to perform a minimum of 6 reps all by yourself, you can move on to the next level.

I selected the under-hand grip as above, despite the neutral (palms facing each other) being potentially stronger - it is because not everyone has access to a Pull-up bar with neutral grips.

YOU CAN DO AT LEAST 6 PULL-UPS (Level 2)

When you can perform at least 6 reps of pull-ups using your own bodyweight, and with no help from a training partner, your goal should be to achieve the ability to perform 2 or more sets. In this phase you can also challenge yourself by taking a more demanding grip position (e.g. palms facing away).

Step 1

Warm-up set: use two warm up sets of lat pull-downs. The first one should be with a load of about 40% of your bodyweight for 10 reps, and the second at about 70% of your bodyweight for 8 reps.

The grip to be used is the same grip as in Level 1 - palms facing your head, shoulder width apart.

Work sets: in your first work set, stop 1 rep short of failure. Take 2 minutes rest, and complete a second set. Stopping short of muscle failure in the first set gives you an opportunity to achieve the same number of reps in the second set.

Once you can perform two sets of 8-10 reps with bodyweight using this grip, move to the next step.

Step 2

Warm-up set: as above but now take a grip with the palms facing away, shoulder width grip.

Work sets: same guidelines as per above.

Once you can perform 2 sets of 8-10 reps with bodyweight using this grip, move the next level.

YOU CAN DO AT LEAST 2 SETS OF 8-10 PULL-UPS (Level 3)

If you continue using bodyweight as your sole source of load when doing Pull-ups, then your progress can quickly stagnate. The solution is to provide variety in stimulus by using additional or external loading (weight attached to your body when doing Pull-ups).

Step 1

Warm up set: use two warm up sets of lat pull-downs. The first one should be with a load of about 40% of your bodyweight for 10 reps, and the second at about 70% of your bodyweight for 8 reps.

The grip to be used is the same grip as in Level 1 - palms facing your head, shoulder width apart.

Work sets: in the first work set, add an external load that will reduce your reps to about 4 reps.

Stop one rep short of failure in the first work set. Take about 3 minutes rest. In the second work set, use an external load that is 20-30% heavier, and aim to get the same number of reps. After resting again for 3 minutes, look to do as many reps as you can using your bodyweight.

Step 2

Warm-up set: use two warm up sets. The first one should be with a load of about 40% of your bodyweight for 10 reps, and the second at about 70% of your bodyweight for 8 reps. The grip to be used is palms facing away from your head, shoulder width apart.

Work sets: in the first work set, stop 1 rep short of failure. Take at least 3 minutes rest, and then

attach a weight to the body (e.g. using a rope on a weight belt or similar) that you could do at least 2 reps with - but only do one rep. After another 3 minutes rest, repeat a set of bodyweight, aiming to do the same number of reps as in the first work set. Rest 3 minutes, and do another single rep with external load. This time, add 10% to the load you used in the first single rep external load set. After another 3 minutes rest, do as many reps as you can do with bodyweight.

General training tips when doing Pull-ups

1. Always start from a stationary hanging position. No contact with the ground and no body sway and your arms totally straight.
2. Pull-up until your chin is over the bar.
3. Avoid using momentum from your lower body. Your ankles crossed, knees bent at about 90 degrees.
4. Control the lowering phase and avoid body sway.
5. Don't attempt a load unless you are totally confident of getting the reps.
6. Warm-up and stretch your Lats prior to strength training them.

Conclusion

Progressions in training provided above should be seen merely as a guideline. Feel free to make any minor adjustments that help you master this exercise. As for other options in Pull-ups, there are many other grip variations and loading parameters you can use once you have exhausted the options shown above. Until then, focus on achieving progression using the technical guidelines and training progressions provided above. Pull-ups are excellent for developing upper body pulling strength and size. They do require a lot more effort but you may find the rewards greater than any other exercise you have done for the upper back.