

Freaky Triceps

You can learn more from my triceps training than you can from most mass monsters with bigger guns. Because my tris have never been easy to grow, I've spent a lot of time figuring out what works and what doesn't. It's taken years of effort and experimentation to achieve my level of development. Now I'll share with you what I've gleaned in that time. These 10 tips for triceps training will help you muscle up the back of your arms in the shortest time possible.

1. WARM UP PROPERLY

Elbow joints and triceps are commonly injured areas, so warm them up thoroughly. I do at least two warm-up sets before I go into my first set. I always do pushdowns first, usually with a rope or an angled bar. It's easiest to lock the elbows in place with pushdowns and safely limber up the area before I move on to freer lifts, such as extensions, which are potentially more dangerous to the elbows, tendons and tris.

2. TARGET DIFFERENT AREAS

The triceps is a seemingly simple muscle group if you focus only on its basic function: to extend the arm. In fact, it's quite complex, for it has three separate heads and every exercise hits these heads in a different way. For example, I feel pushdowns with a bar mostly in the outer heads, but pushdowns with a rope mostly in the inner heads. As another example, I sometimes do lying extensions with two dumbbells instead of a cambered bar, and I feel these working the lower part of my tris nearest to my elbows. Do a variety of exercises in different ways to exhaust every aspect of your triceps.

3. ALWAYS USE PROPER FORM

There is no reason to cheat up a triceps lift. Doing so will only increase your odds of injury. The key to every triceps exercise is to keep your elbows as still as possible. Your elbow joints are simple hinges, and they can bend only one way and on a direct line. Lock your shoulders, elbows and wrists in place, and move only your forearms.

4. FOCUS ON THE CONTRACTION

Many people make a major mistake by banging out pushdowns and extensions one after another without ever locking out. The lockout is the most important part of a triceps lift, because the tris only contract 100% when the arms are fully extended. Pause at the lockout position of each rep for a couple of seconds and squeeze the muscles. Then the negative phase of the lift should be slow. Don't think in terms of one rep, two reps, etc. Instead, the pattern should be "one, hold, two, hold." That's how you really focus on your tris.

5. BUILD WITH PYRAMIDS

I'm a firm believer in pyramiding sets. This means I increase the weights and decrease the reps each subsequent set. Doing so helps to warm up my triceps and accustom them to progressively heavier sets. I don't go particularly heavy when training tris, but I still like to pyramid each exercise. For example, on my moderate workout day, I'll start with 15 reps of rope pushdowns. Then I'll increase the weight slightly for a second set of 12 reps. Finally, I'll up the weight again for a final set of 10 reps. Pyramiding is the safest and most effective way to build strength and size.

6. CHANGE IS GOOD

I suggest doing two different workouts, a moderate session and a heavier session, and alternating them from week to week. It's not just the number of reps that changes. I also do different exercises on the moderate day than on the heavy day. These alternating weeks naturally give my routine a lot of variety. Still, every so often, I switch things up and do a completely different exercise just to keep my muscles off guard and growing. You can't expect to make dramatic changes to your body while doing the same routine time after time.

7. SUCCEED BY FAILING

Push every set to failure. I pick a heavy enough weight so that by the time I get to the last few reps, my muscles are close to spent. It's those final reps that make all the difference. The first reps are just taxing the triceps enough so you can get to those last reps and fully exhaust the muscles. That's why it does no good to stop far before failure. To grow, you need to push a set until you can't go anymore.

8. AVOID OVERTRAINING

Earlier in my career, I was over-training triceps. Remember that tris are also worked during chest and shoulder presses. Now I'm careful not to lock out my chest and shoulder presses, so I don't stress tris as much during those exercises. To further guard against over-training, I work triceps only once per week, and I

hit them several days removed from my chest and shoulder sessions. I also believe in a limited number of sets, especially since I push those sets to failure. Even after my many years of training and even though I give my tris a week to recover, I do a total of only nine sets. My advice is to train your triceps intensely for nine sets and then give them plenty of time to rest and grow.

9. STRIKE A POSE

I'm a big believer in doing a lot of posing coming into a show, not only to improve my presentation and the visual condition of my physique, but also to give me the stamina to flex throughout prejudging. For the triceps, posing brings out details in the three heads, and it also strengthens the mind-muscle connection. For these reasons, even if you don't have any plans to step onstage, you should flex your tris throughout your workouts for 15-20 seconds at a time.

10. WRITE IT DOWN

Keep a training log and write down everything about your workouts. I do. This way, I know exactly what I've done before: what exercise at what weight and for how many reps. It keeps me constantly trying to top myself and get stronger and better, and it helps me monitor what works and what doesn't. This is as true for any other body part as it is for triceps training. Such a record is one of the most valuable tools anyone can have. If you can see where you've been and you know exactly where you are, you'll get where you want to go much faster.