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How to squat properly with weights

The barbell back squat, like the deadlift, is one of the most effective exercises out there—check out our Deadlift technique post for information on that exercise. It is also one of the most difficult to learn and get right, as it can cause injuries if not done correctly. Therefore, it is always good to practice with just the bar until you develop a safe technique. Small weight will only cause small errors with no injury, whereas big weights will cause big errors and may result in more severe injuries. Things to remember The first thing to get right is the trunk positioning. You should do this part of the movement without any weight to begin with. The key is to make sure your trunk is kept upright, your head should be pulled back, your chest raised, and you should have a slight/ neutral arch in your lower back. A common mistake is excessive forward flexion (bending too far at the waist), especially when the weight is too heavy, and thus losing the natural lordic curve—the slight arch in your lower back. Your eyes should be looking straight ahead, which will help you to keep your head still. Maintain a level head position throughout the movement. Do not look up or down. In addition to this, foot position is very important during the squat. A general guide is to ensure that your feet are positioned at shoulder width or slightly wider than shoulder width apart. Your toes should be turned out approximately 10-15 degrees. Your knees should be slightly flexed (bent) and this will enable a strong and stable starting position. Apparatus The best place to carry out the barbell back squat is in the squat rack. It's made for this and has safety guards inbuilt. Failing that, a power cage is also great. You will need to adjust the pins on a power cage to a height just below where the bottom of your movement will be. The right height is crucial so that if you need to bail, you can safely rest the weight and get out without causing injury. Finding your top position. This is the point where you remove and replace the bar. When using a squat rack, there are numerous slots to choose from. It's important to choose the correct slotting so that when you replace the weight, you won't need to jump it into the slot. This can be dangerous, as if you miss one side or both the weight will come crashing down. Similarly, with the power cage you need to make sure the top J hooks are at the right level. A good way to find the correct level is to have the bar at a height that is just under your lower chest line. You may have noticed people using a towel or padding whilst carrying out this movement. And whilst this can make the exercise more comfortable, it can also add some stability issues. With padding, the weight is allowed to rock due to less contact with the body. It is good to try to build up your tolerance to using just the bar. Try to have the bar resting on your upper trapezius muscles (upper back muscles). If there isn't much muscle mass there, consider working in some trapezius exercises such as barbell shrugs. Now place your hands on the bar a comfortable distance from your shoulders; a similar placing to that which you'd use for a normal chest press. Make sure that the weight is evenly distributed on both sides to avoid it tipping to one side. Most bars have a grip area in the middle which will help you place your back and hands in an even position. Now you can go up to take the weight off the rack and onto your back, keeping that upright back position throughout. The movement The first part of the movement is the walk back. This can be the part of the movement that causes many injuries. Either by taking the weight off the rack incorrectly or tripping when walking back. Make sure that your area is clear of any water bottles, journals, weights and anything else that might trip you. Take one step backwards and make sure that you are clear of any slots on the squat rack. Stand with feet shoulder width apart with the toes facing slightly outward. Begin movement by bending at the hips and the knees, keeping the feet flat on the floor, head and chest up, body balanced and spine maintaining normal lordotic curve. Engage the core to protect the spine. Lower to the point you feel comfortable going down to with the weight on your back. The goal is to get your knees bent past 90 degrees, however everyone is different so if you can't get that low, don't push it. Once at the bottom, engage the muscles of the legs and the glutes to push up. On the push upwards, maintain the same principles as lowering; keeping the feet flat on the floor, head and chest up, body balanced and spine maintaining normal lordotic curve. Focus on engaging the legs and glutes for power, and avoid pushing hard with the back. Once you have carried out your reps, return the weight to the hooks and place back gently. Make sure the bar is safely rested both side before fully releasing. To recap: Teaching points Rack should be slightly lower than shoulder height Step under bar and position it on upper trapezius muscles and back of shoulder Hands as close as possible to shoulders with elbows pointing down (Create a 'W'position with your arms) Stand up and take one step backwards Stand with feet shoulder width apart OR shoulder width plus width of foot apart, head and chest up and eyes looking forward—NORMAL POSTURE Begin movement by bending at the hips and the knees, keeping the feet flat on the floor, head and chest up, body balanced and spine maintaining normal lordotic curve Descend as far as possible while keeping spine in neutral position (slight curve in back) Keep knees over toes and heels on the floor Reverse movement on way up maintaining correct posture at all times Common errors Heels lifting off floor—trying to keep back vertical (straight) by keeping the chest up and pushing through the heels Knees traveling excessively forward over toes Bending at waist and losing lordotic curve Head and chest dropping Movement analysis Joint Action at each joint during the concentric phase Main muscles performing the action at each joint Exercise Classification Hip Extension Gluteus Maximus Hamstrings Compound Knee Extension Quadriceps Compound Ankle Plantar Flexion (Passive) Gastrocnemius Soleus Compound Squat variations With this exercise there are more than 40 different variations, each recruiting different muscles and requiring a different technique. The most popular being: Body weight squat – same movement, but without any added weight Pistol squat (one-legged squat) – similar movement, but requiring balance. The leg that is not in use is pointed forward, to replicate the image of a pistol. Sumo squat – wide stance with toes pointed far out. The bottom position replicates how a sumo might crouch in a fight. Jump squat - using plyometric muscle recruitment, jump then lower into position, creating extra load Front barbell squat - instead of having the barbell resting on your back, you place the weight in front of your neck, resting on your shoulders. The movement requires you to sit back more to maintain balance, it is good for keeping the back more upright. Overhead squat – holding the weight high above your head, in the top position of the shoulder press, then squat like this. Requires more balance and stability. Goblet squat - holding a dumbbell vertically, like a goblet, in front of your chest. Adds weight in a different place to recruit different muscles. Medically reviewed by Daniel Bubnis, M.S., NASM-CPT, NASE Level II-CSS – Written by Nicole Davis on November 22, 2019Share on PinterestWe're excited to say that the squat bandwagon has arrived, and it's here to stay. If this powerful move isn't in your exercise repertoire yet, it should be! And we've got the stats to prove it. Called an "ideal exercise to strengthen the entire lower limb for both sporting and ADLs (activities of daily life)," the squat has performance and aesthetic benefits. Want to jump higher? Squat. Build your core strength? Squat. Fill out the seat of your jeans more? Squat. If you're new to squatting but ready to give it a go, read on for a comprehensive guide on how to squat with proper form. While weighted squats are great for developing strength, it's important that you have proper form in a bodyweight squat first. The mechanics of a squat are more complex than they may seem, so ensuring that all joints and muscles are moving correctly together is key to preventing injury and getting the most out of the exercise. Squat therapy is a great way to get there. Used as a way to break down all of the subtle movements of a squat, this combination of drills should get you moving with ease. To try this sequence, complete 2 sets of 5 reps each.Wall squatShare on PinterestPlace a bench or low chair about 3 feet from the wall – when you squat, your butt should touch the edge of the surface. Face the wall with your feet shoulder- to hip-width apart. Keeping your chest up and core braced, sit back into your hips and bend your knees, taking about 5 seconds to squat down until your face gets too close to the wall or your butt touches the bench. Return to start by quickly pushing through your entire foot. When this gets easier, extend your arms above head and complete the same movement. When that gets easier, move the bench closer to the wall, continuing to work on your flexibility and range of motion. Goblet squatShare on PinterestHold a light plate or dumbbell by its sides at chest level, so your elbows are pointing out and down. Stand with your feet shoulder- to hip-width apart. Begin to squat, sitting your hips back and bending your knees. As you drop into a deep squat, your elbows should come inside your knees, pushing them out. Hold here for a few seconds, take a deep breath, then try to sink a bit lower. Repeat this 3 to 4 times, then stand up. As a beginner, work on this for sequence alone for 1 to 2 weeks before adding any additional weight. When you progress to using added weight, perform this sequence as a warm-up beforehand. A basic bodyweight squat is a foundational move. Your quads, glutes, and hamstrings will do the major work here, while your core will work to stabilize you throughout. You should be able to complete 3 sets of 15 reps with ease before adding weight.To get moving:Stand with your feet shoulder-width apart, resting your arms straight down at your sides.Bracing your core and keeping a proud chest, begin to push your hips back, bending your knees as if you're going to sit down. Ensure that your knees do not cave in. When your thighs are parallel to the floor, pause. Push up evenly through your whole foot back to the starting position.Taking it one step further, both the deep squat and one-legged squat require larger ranges of motion and more flexibility than a basic bodyweight squat. Start by completing 2 sets of 10 reps, then work your way up to 3 sets. Deep squatEndearingly referred to as the "ATG" (a** to grass) squat, a deep squat means your thighs go past parallel. You'll need quite a bit of flexibility to achieve a deep squat, and there is an increased possibility of injury if you add a lot of external weight. To get moving:Perform a basic bodyweight squat, but instead of stopping when your thighs reach parallel, keep going – the crease in your hip should fall below your knee, with your butt almost touching the ground.Return to start, pushing through your entire foot and ensuring that your torso stays upright. One-legged squatSquatting on one leg – also referred to as a pistol squat – is an advanced variation on a squat with tons of benefits. You'll need a sizable amount of flexibility and strength – more than you'll need for a basic bodyweight squat – to complete a one-legged squat. But you can start high and drop lower and lower the better you get at them. To get moving:Stand next to your stable surface and lift your outside foot off the ground, bending your knee at a 90-degree angle. Hike your outside hip.Begin to squat on your inside leg, ensuring that your inside knee does not cave in. Try to reach parallel, using the stable surface if needed.Once you've dropped as far as you can go, push back up through your entire foot and return to start. Repeat desired number of reps, then switch legs. Adding weight to your squats with a barbell will not only strengthen your lower body and core, but give your upper body a workout, too. It's best to squat in a rack or cage to ensure safety while loading the barbell and, if you're unable to complete a rep, "fail out" when needed. Start with 2 sets of 10 to 12 reps of each of these exercises. Back squatThe back squat is what most people think of when they think of a weighted squat. It's a great progression of the basic bodyweight squat. You'll build strength in your quads, glutes, hamstrings and core, and up your power, too. To get moving:Safely load the barbell onto your traps and shoulders. Stand with your feet shoulder-width apart, toes slightly out, core braced, and chest up. Initiate a basic squat movement – hips back, knees bent, ensuring they fall out, not in. Pause when your thighs reach about parallel to the ground. Push through your entire foot to return to start. Front squatMore quad-specific than a back squat, the front squat loads the weight on the front of your body instead. You'll need a lighter barbell for the front squat, too. To get moving:Position the barbell so it's resting on the front side of your shoulders. It you straighten your arms in front of you, the barbell shouldn't move. Again, your feet should be shoulder-width apart, toes slightly out, core braced, and chest up.Begin to sit back with your hips, bending the knees, and stopping when your thighs hit parallel to the ground. Push through your entire foot to return to start. How to fail a barbell squat If the weight gets too heavy and you aren't able to complete the squat rep, use the rack or cage to your advantage. To do this, sink lower than you'd normally squat, allowing the rack or cage to catch the barbell, and come up from underneath. Another option is to work with a spotter during your barbell squat reps. This person will stand behind you and help guide the weight back up if you can't complete the rep. If you're on your own and you can't complete a rep, your goal will be to push the barbell off your back while moving your body quickly forward to get out of the way. Squats with dumbbells, medicine balls, and on machines are also effective for building strength. Start with 2 sets of 10 to 12 reps of each of these exercises. Dumbbell squatHolding dumbbells down at your side will enable a different motion pattern, as well as give your upper body a workout.To get moving:Hold a dumbbell in each hand with your arms down at your sides. Stand with your feet shoulder-width apart and your toes slightly pointed out. Complete a basic squat, allowing the weights to continue to hang down at your sides. Overhead squat with medicine ballThe overhead squat requires quite a bit of flexibility in the hips, shoulders, and thoracic spine, so go easy on the weight until you've mastered the movement. To get moving:Stand with your feet shoulder-width apart and hold a medicine ball overhead. Squat down while the medicine ball stays overhead – initiate the movement in the hips, of course, and aim to keep the medicine ball as close to upright as you can. Hack squatWhile you can use a barbell for a hack squat, the hack squat machine is friendlier for beginners, so hit the gym for this one!To get moving:Step up onto the machine, back on the support and knees nearly straight. Your feet should be about shoulder-width apart, your shoulders should rest right underneath the pads, your elbows should be bent, and your hands should be holding the handles.Release the weight and squat down, bending your knees and keeping your back, neck, and head flush against the machine. Resist the knees caving in, and when your thighs reach parallel, push back up to start. The most common mistakes while squatting include:Knees caving in. Always make sure your knees fall out.Not leading with your hips. The squat movement is initiated with your hips, not your knees.Allowing your knees to fall over your toes. Sitting back into your hips will prevent this.Not engaging your core. A strong core is the foundation of this movement.Allowing your chest to fall forward. A proud chest is key to a proper squat. Forgetting to breathe. Inhale on the way down, exhale on the way back up.If you aren't squatting yet, it's time to give it a try! Nailing proper form to start is key, so go slowly and make sure you feel comfortable with the movement before progressing. It's a great idea to video yourself so you can look at your form more objectively and make improvements as you go. Good luck, and squat on!Nicole Davis is a writer based in Madison, WI, a personal trainer, and a group fitness instructor whose goal is to help women live stronger, healthier, happier lives. When she's not working out with her husband or chasing around her young daughter, she's watching crime TV shows or making sourdough bread from scratch. Find her on Instagram for fitness tidbits, #momlife, and more. Last medically reviewed on November 22, 2019

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