

What To Do When You're Too Skinny

Todd Wilson

"No matter how much I lift and no matter how much I eat, I just can't put on weight." - Any **"hardgainer"** in any gym in America.

Hardgainers. Sometimes you don't know whether to pity them, or just die laughing. I mean, how can you not grow doing 25 sets of cable curls and triceps kickbacks while eating a consistent diet of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and Mountain Dew?

Let's start with diet! This won't be a treatise on diet, but here are some quick dos and don'ts.

- Don't think that you eat enough if you're not making gains. Virtually every **"hardgainer"** thinks they eat enough. However, when they keep a food log for an entire week, almost invariably they don't get enough calories.

- Emphasize protein. A **"hardgainer"** doesn't necessarily need to go on one of the popular low-carb diets; however, they do need protein and a bunch of it. If you're a **"hardgainer,"** DO NOT eat without consuming at least 20, preferably 40 grams of protein per meal, and shoot for a total of 2 grams of protein per pound of body weight a day! Yes, I know the golden rule of the iron game has always been 1 gram per pound, and plenty of people have gained using that figure. However, in my opinion that is the minimal amount you should get. And if anyone tries to inform you that heavy protein consumption will damage your kidneys, liver, or other vital organs, please ask them to provide evidence from the scientific literature. That way, you will never see this person again, because they will spend the rest of their life looking for something that doesn't exist. Consuming 2 grams of protein per pound of body weight will allow you to break through hypertrophy plateaus.

- Speaking of meals, you have to eat a minimum of 5 meals a day. Do not tell me you are too busy - that is an excuse. You can get 5 meals a day - it's easy. However, if you are really serious about gaining some solid mass, get 7 meals a day. Assuming you sleep 8 hours a night, that means you're eating a meal every 2-3 hours while you are awake. Again, it can be done. You may have to get up early and fix sandwiches for the day, but how bad do you want to be big?

- Postworkout supplementation is critical! After a workout you need nutrition. Consume a postworkout shake with 1-2 grams of carbs per pound of body weight. Get at least 40 grams of protein in your postworkout shake. If you weigh over 160 lbs., multiply your body weight by .25, and that will give you the correct amount of protein in grams. Attempt to minimize fat intake post-workout. Protein is ideally whey. Carbs should be from carb sources that have a high glycemic index. Therefore, pineapple juice and

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bananas are in! A great trick I learned back when I was skinny (if you're serious about getting bigger quicker) is to mix cornflakes with pineapple juice and whey protein. It provides calories with an incredible glycemic index rating, and therefore an insulin spike which is desirable post-workout.

- Emphasize whole food meals. Don't get caught up in thinking that a shake, no matter how many calories, is as good as whole food. In those whole food meals, emphasize lean protein sources, and vegetable sources for carbs. If you're skinny, bread and pasta are fine, but not every meal every day. Once or twice a week is ok, but use whole wheat varieties.

- Use supplements wisely. Nothing is funnier than a **hardgainer** using Ripped Fuel! I'm sorry, but I don't pity those guys, I just laugh until I have to wipe my nose! Post-workout supplementation is probably the most important aspect of gaining lean weight, assuming calorie requirements are met, and the workout routine is effective. After that, I would strongly recommend fish oils (9 capsules a day often works well). Buy small bottles and rotate brands to ensure freshness and to avoid heavy metals possibly contained therein. Vitamin C - I cannot stress the importance of this vitamin enough. In fact, look for an upcoming article about it alone! Use the bowel tolerance test. Take up to 10 grams of vitamin C. When you feel intestinal distress, back off a smidgen, and that is your own personal optimal vitamin C dosage. Vitamin C is a powerful antioxidant, but I would also recommend an antioxidant blend. They're fairly cheap. Creatine - I'm not going to say much about this supplement, as so much info is available online. Bottom line is that it is effective and safe, and anyone telling you anything else doesn't know what they're talking about. If you are reading about it and they list any negative side effects, find a better source of information. Some physiologists and even strength coaches will disagree, but I feel loading is useful. I've seen people who did and did not respond to not loading, but frankly I have never seen anyone not respond to loading. Supplement with magnesium. Studies indicate that 70% of the population is magnesium-deficient, and I suspect a higher percentage. Use forms other than magnesium oxide, which is essentially worthless. There are other potentially useful supplements, but on a shoestring budget, those would be my top recommendations. If you can afford it, I would also recommend supplementing with .44 grams of branched chain amino acids during training. I received this tip from Charles Poliquin, and it absolutely works wonders. Mix them with a liter of water and sip it during training.

- Stay away from junk food, fried foods, and alcohol. I really shouldn't have to say this, but it has to be said.

Now, training! What exercises and what sets and reps will make me HOOGE? Well, despite common strength-training lore, there isn't one way. I will wager that you cannot find someone with appreciable muscle mass who has been on the same 12-week program for several years and has steadily gained lean mass. One thing big guys have in common is when someone says something about an exercise, set/rep scheme, or particular

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program, big guys typically respond by saying "Yeah, I've tried it." They may have had varying degrees of success, but the point is that they, over the course of their training life, have used many different methods. Variation of training methods is almost as important as the training method itself. Obviously some are better than others. Below are some guidelines used by most successful training programs - incorporate them into the routines you design or use.

- When you're skinny, there is no such thing as functional and nonfunctional hypertrophy. I have an article on this site that discusses functional vs. non-functional hypertrophy. However, if you're 6 feet 2 inches and 160 lbs., unless you're incredibly strong, any hypertrophy you achieve will be functional. The smaller and weaker the individual, the more closely the mass to strength ratio is to 1:1. As you increase in size, strength, and training age, you will gradually become more neurologically efficient and need relative strength and power methods to increase strength and power. However, if you're 16, skinny, and marvel at guys who bench 225 for 5 reps, you're going to gain with just about anything you do. And any gain will be beneficial.

- If you've been training for less than 2 years, emphasize reps over 8 reps. One of the classic mass programs for beginners has always been the 20 rep squat routine. It works, but no world champion powerlifter credits his world records to 20 rep squatting. Why? Because for the elite squatter, it does not provide enough intensity. However, for the beginner, it does provide enough volume. Volume is what beginners should emphasize. Beginners should emphasize reps in the 6-20 range, sets in the 1-4 range and exercises per workout in the 4-12 range. Rest intervals should vary between 30 seconds and 3 minutes.

- If you've been seriously training for 2-5 years and are still skinny, stop doing what you've been doing! First, make sure that you've been training seriously and consistently for more than two years and not going to the gym with buddies for 2 plus years. Assuming you have been doing an honest job, have put on considerable weight and gained considerable strength, but still consider yourself skinny: Emphasize reps in the 4-12 range, sets in the 4-12 range, and exercises per workout in the 2-8 range. Rest intervals should vary between 30 seconds and 4 minutes.

- Emphasize big compound movements. If anyone tells you that they got big triceps from doing lots of triceps kickbacks, point at their triceps and laugh, because they aren't very big, I assure you. Evidently, they've been looking in one of those fun house mirrors. The following are exercise choices for various body parts that maximize motor unit recruitment and therefore mass gains.

- Lower body: All squat variations, all deadlift variations (the snatch grip deadlift from the podium is one of my personal favorites), Trap bar lifts (for greater quadricep activation, use a board or wedge under your feet), Romanian Deadlifts, Glute Ham Gastroc Raises, Step-up variations, split squat variations, Good Morning variations, and back extensions. All told, with those lifts and their variations, you have over one hundred exercises to choose from.

- Upper body push muscles (pectorals, triceps, anterior and lateral deltoids, et. al.): All variations of the bench press: inclines, declines, flat, using dumb bells, straight bars, and cambered bars. Dips and overhead press variations are critical as well.

- Upper body pull muscles (latissimus dorsi, posterior deltoid, rhomboids, teres major, et. al.): Variations of the pullup and chinup and variations of the row: standing with a barbell, seated with a cable pulley, dumb bells, etc.

That about covers it for exercises. I didn't list any specific bicep or tricep exercises per se. I am not against a "**hardgainer**" having an "arm day" in his split, but emphasis should be on increasing poundages in the incline press and pullup more so than in the Scott curl and the tricep extension with an EZ bar.

- Don't perform squats on the same day as deadlifts or good mornings. This can lead to injury and/or overtraining. If you perform step-ups and/or split squat variations on the same day as deadlifts or good morning variations, perform the step up and split squats first in order to avoid injury due to a fatigued lower back.

- After you warm up, complete your workout in less than an hour. Over an hour and you're wasting time. Androgen levels peak at about the 40-minute mark. Thereafter cortisol starts rising, and the anabolic environment becomes catabolic (i.e., muscle wasting). Hence the importance of post-workout nutrition and vitamin C. Many **hardgainers** make the mistake of staying in the gym for over 2 hours at a time. If you can't get a workout in in an hour, you do not know how to structure one properly. Sometimes, a leg day may go for an hour and ten or fifteen minutes.

- Emphasize the muscles you can't see to start with. Most beginners want beach muscles. Truthfully, the muscles with the most room for growth in most trainees are the lats, spinal erectors, glutes, and hamstrings. One thing that ALL really strong guys have in common is a trench running down the middle of their back. This is due to the hypertrophy of the erector muscles. If they are strong, your glutes and hamstrings are strong. They are built via deadlift and good morning variations, Romanian Deadlifts, glute ham gastroc variations, etc.

- Pair antagonist muscle groups. For example, when performing decline dumb bell presses: if you are performing sets of 8 reps, and want to rest 3 minutes in between sets, for better results, perform the set, rest 90 seconds and perform a set of chin ups, rest 90 seconds and perform a set of decline presses. Besides having neurological benefits of allowing the muscle better recuperation in between sets, this allows for more economic training time.

- If possible, train twice a day. Lower reps in the morning, higher reps in the evening. Allow between 4 and 6 hours between workouts. And only perform them for 2 weeks in a row before allowing 3 weeks of training once a day.

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- Never train more than two days in a row.
- Make progress every single session. Add weight to the bar, or reps to the set every single workout. Don't worry about 5 pounds per workout or any nonsense like that, but there is little point in repeating a workout.
- Don't be anal retentive! "**Hardgainers**" often mistakenly think that if they do not follow a program or diet to the letter, the earth will reverse rotation, the moon will change orbits, the polar ice caps will melt and dogs and cats will start living together. Relax! You'll live and make gains if you miss a rep, skip a meal, etc. Now, you can't make things like that routine, but don't worry about every little detail. To quote Dr. Squat, Fred Hatfield, "Just lift the damn bar!" Worrying about every detail increases cortisol output which can diminish gains.
- Proper form on every rep of every set is critical. Lifting sloppy is a trademark of many hard gainers. Check your ego at the door, and use weights that you can handle using correct form. Don't worry about what other people are using or thinking - that's what insecure people do. Be secure in your decision-making processes.
- Use undulating periodization, utilizing maximal strength and hypertrophy protocols. For example, if you have been doing 2 sets of squats for 20 reps and two sets of leg curls for 12 reps for 6 workouts, for the next microcycle I would want to increase my squat poundages. Therefore I may use 4 sets of 6-8 reps of each. In the next microcycle I would perhaps use 4 sets of split squats antagonistically paired with good mornings for 8-12 reps each, and 3 sets of step-ups and Romanian Deadlifts for 12-15 reps each in the same workout.
- Go to bed and get some sleep! Have regular sleeping habits. Don't stay out on the weekends all night.

Use the tips above to construct or pick a program to use consistently, work hard and watch your eating habits and lean mass gains are guaranteed if you're a "**hardgainer**." Speaking of that word, I hate it! If you noticed, I've put quotation marks around it throughout this article. The reason is that many people use it as an excuse to be skinny. They lift for a while, eat like crap, don't know what they're doing in the weight room, and oh, they're a **hardgainer**. No, you're not, you've just never trained or lived properly. Get it right! Failures give excuses, winners get results.

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