
How Do I Know When to Attempt More Advanced Exercises?

Think of your body as a Petri dish under a microscope. It's a science experiment. You add a drop of 'substance A' to the dish and observe the results. Whatever changes, you know it was caused by 'substance A'. Then, you add 'substance B', and observe again. If anything happens, you attribute it to 'substance B'. By adding one variable at a time, you know what's caused the change. Now imagine you add substances A, B, C, D, E in one go. Something changes, but you don't know which substance caused that change.

This 'one variable at a time' approach is how we need to reintroduce movements into your training. Our priority is to start with an exercise that causes no aggravation. From here, we can slowly move up our Hierarchy of Exercise Modification. Take one step up the hierarchy (move closer to the original exercise which you're substituting for), but make that step only for one exercise. See how your body responds. If the injury is aggravated, step back down to a safe level and try again when you're further along your rehabilitation path. If there's no aggravation, try this same exercise again in a few days under the same circumstances (reps, sets, load etc). If there's still no aggravation, you're ready to try for that next step. Continue this process until you're back to normal training.

The key here is that you should be looking for gradual, pain free progression, with two pain free sessions before you progress. And don't forget to celebrate those steps up the hierarchy – every step means you're getting closer to full, unmodified training.

Cataloguing Your Progress:

As you progress through your rehabilitation, you should keep a record of the exercises you're doing and the impact they have on the injury. You can divide those exercises into three columns.

The first column is the green column. In this column, put the exercises that have no ability to aggravate the injury, even when performed under intensity. For example, if you have an ankle injury, a strict pull-up would be in the green column. The second column is the orange column. Here, you put the exercises that you need to be careful with. You can do them without aggravation, but only if you're paying full attention to consistently sound mechanics. If you have an elbow injury, you might put power cleans here. They're fine, as long as you don't bend the arms early. You can still include these 'orange' exercises in your training, but just give them plenty of care. The third column is the red column. These are the movements which currently aggravate your injury. For example, deadlifts may be in this column if you have a back injury. Exercises in the red column need modification using our Hierarchy.

Of course, the aim here is to move everything from red to orange to green. By following a process of gradual progression through our hierarchy of modification, red exercises can be modified to the point that they no longer cause aggravation (though still go as close as possible to the intended stimulus). Then, as your injury improves, move closer to the initial stimulus by stepping up the hierarchy and progressively moving each exercise from red towards green.

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