

Getting That Kung Fu Grip

A strong grip gives you a better first impression, as in "He has a firm handshake.

" A strong grip shows you're in control, as in the saying, "She's got a good grip on life, "--or not--as in, "He let that one slip through his fingers." And a strong, powerful grip is important in any sport, including golf, tennis, bodybuilding, rock climbing, or auto racing.

In the medical world, grip strength is often used as an indicator of overall strength and health.

One study from the Honolulu Heart Program showed that low handgrip strength predicted disability 25 years later in a sample of initially healthy middle-aged men.

But a strong grip is essential in the martial arts. If you're grappling, a strong grip gives you the leverage to throw your opponent or lock his or her joints. If you're striking, your fingers, wrists, and forearms need to be strong to deliver powerful blows. We'll look at the different types of grip strength, and then we'll cover several ways to develop a strong grip.

Grip Strength Types

Randall Strossen, sports psychologist, power lifting guru, and purveyor of grip-building apparatus through his Iron mind company, says there's three types of grip strength:

Crushing: used in shaking hands, or crumpling a soda can in your fist

Pinching: used in, well, pinching something between your fingertips

Supporting: used in holding on to shopping bags or clinging to a ledge while rock climbing. Martial artists need crushing and pinching grip strength the most. Even if you're not grappling with your opponent, grip strength comes into play when trapping and checking, as in jeet kune do, escrima, or Wing Chun Gung Fu. Strong fingers and hands are essential for preventing injury

when punching with your fists, throwing finger jabs, or using knife-hand strikes to break boards and bricks.

[Grip Strength Anatomy](#)

Two areas of your body contribute to grip strength: your hand, including the fingers and palm, and your forearms, including your wrists. You need to strengthen your fingers and other parts of your hand to help prevent injury when striking, especially with non-fist strikes like the finger jab, eagle claw, or backhand strike. You also need to strengthen the wrist so that it doesn't collapse upon impact during a punch, or that it can withstand the twisting of an Aikido throw. Both the hand and the forearm are important to strengthen in order to gain a strong grip.

[Exercises for Developing Grip Strength](#)

There's a lot of exercises you can do to develop your grip strength. We'll cover a few simple ones in this article that don't need fancy equipment or special apparatus, and that you can do just about anywhere. Next time we'll look at some exercises that use fancier equipment.

[Exercises Without Apparatus](#)

You can improve your grip strength without any apparatus, machines, or equipment at all, just your own two hands. Here's a few zero-apparatus, self-resistance exercises:

[Finger Exercises](#)

Isometric Fist: Simply make a fist and clench it tightly for one second, and then splay your fingers out, straightening each one as far as it can. Repeat.

Isometric Pinch: Pinch your index finger and thumb together tightly for one second, and then spread them out as far as they can go. Repeat for the other fingers.

Finger Extensions: Make a fist and cover the fist with your other hand, slightly cupped, as in the salute used by some kung fu or kenpo schools.

Extend your fingers outward from the fist, and apply resistance with the covering hand. Do the same action for the thumb. This isn't an isometric exercise (an exercise where you tense a muscle but keep the limb stationary)--you do want to go through your fingers' range of motion, just under resistance from the other hand.

Repeat until that hand is fatigued, and then do the same sequence for your other hand.

Fingertip Pushups: Just like regular pushups, except that instead of starting by holding yourself with your palms flat on the floor, you hold yourself up on your fingertips. If these are too hard to start with, do fingertip pushups against the wall. Bruce Lee used to show off by doing these by supporting himself on just the index finger and thumb on one hand. You might want to start out using all ten fingers, though.

Wrist Exercises

Self-resistance Wrist Curls: Hold your hand palm up in front of you, with your elbow against your ribs, so that your arm forms a 90-degree angle at the elbow. If you're a bowler, it's just like the starting position with the ball held in your palm.

Make a fist, and let your fist hang down from your forearm. Put your other hand on top of your fist and curl your fist upward, applying downward resistance with the other hand to make the curl harder. Repeat with the other wrist.

Next, hold your hand palm down, and do reverse curls with self-resistance: curl your fist upward, while applying downward resistance to the back of your fist with the other hand. Repeat with the other wrist.

As with the finger extensions, go through the wrists' range of motion--these aren't isometric exercises.

Self-resistance Wrist Twists: Hold your hand palm up in front of you, with your forearm against your ribs, so that your arm forms a 90-degree angle at the elbow.

Make a fist. Grab the fist with your other hand, and attempt to twist your fist while applying resistance with the other hand (if it's the right hand, twist it counter-clockwise, if it's the left hand, twist it clockwise). Repeat with the other wrist.

Next, hold your hand palm down, make a fist, and twist the wrist the other way. Repeat with the other hand. As with the finger extensions, go through the wrists' range of motion.

Fist Pushups: Just like regular pushups, except that instead of starting by holding yourself with your palms flat on the floor, you hold yourself up on your fists, with the striking knuckles against the floor.

Exercises Using Free Apparatus

If these zero-apparatus exercises get too boring, you can also try a few exercises that use stuff you can find lying around your house or office. These work well for building up your grip strength, and still don't require any money at all.

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Exercises Using Cheap or Free Apparatus

A lot of the tools that will give you a strong grip can be found lying around your house. I think About.com's Frugal Living Guide would love these. Here are a few exercises that use free or cheap materials:

Finger Exercises

Farmer's Walk: Pick up two heavy buckets (fill them with water, sand, gravel, or if you're really a farmer, slop for the pigs) and walk around with them until you can't hold on any longer.

Rest for a while, then do it again.

Newspaper Wadding: Spread a sheet of newspaper out on a table and crumple it up into a ball with one hand, starting from one corner. Keep your hand stationary and use just your fingers to pull more paper into your fist. Once you've got the whole sheet as a ball of paper in your hand, squeeze it tightly until it's compressed. Toss the ball into the recycle bin and wad up another sheet of newspaper. Repeat with the other hand.

Bottle Cap Bending: This might be more of a bar stunt than an exercise, but it's fun anyway.

After opening up a bottle of your favorite beverage, bend the cap between your index finger and thumb. See how many caps you can fit into an empty bottle until your hands get tired, or you fall off your barstool.

Rubber Band Expanding: Wrap a rubber band around your fingertips and spread out your fingers against the rubber band's resistance.

Rubber Ball Squeezing: The time-honored exercise of tennis players everywhere; take a tennis ball or other rubber ball and squeeze it in your hand. Lots of companies hand out free "stress balls" for office workers to squeeze during breaks; these are great to start with, but you might want something with a bit more resistance after a while.

Brick Pinch Lift: Pick up a brick by pinching it between your fingertips and thumb and walk around the room, carrying the brick with your arm hanging straight down at your side. If you want more resistance, balance a brick or two on one end and then pick up the whole thing.

Wrist Exercises

Leverage Bar: A leverage bar is any stick that has weight on one end. You hold the bar by the non-weighted end and move the weighted end around with just your wrist muscles.

For example, a sledgehammer makes a great leverage bar. Hold the sledgehammer with your arm hanging at your side so that the hammer is perpendicular to your body. Flex your wrist up and down, as if hammering something with the "business" end. If a sledgehammer is too much weight, try a regular carpenter's hammer, or a broom. You can always increase the resistance by holding the bar further away from the weighted end. Try holding a regular kitchen broom at the extreme end of the handle and move the broom end around--it doesn't seem like it would be much weight, but it's pretty tough.

Do the same flexes with the bar's weighted end pointing behind you, sticking out of your fist from the pinky side. Repeat with the other hand.

One-Hand Chair Lift: Again, this is probably more a stunt than an exercise, but it does give your grip and forearm a tough challenge. Pick up a chair or barstool by one leg, grasping the leg as close to the floor as possible. It's easier if you try a back leg first, as the weight of the back of the chair is centered over your hand instead of levering out in space.

If you can do the chair raise with someone sitting on the chair, well, you probably don't need these exercises.

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