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Dumbbell Vertical Press

Michael Rutherford

When assessing the most functional of upper body movements, it is tough to argue against the efficacy of vertical pressing movements (a.k.a. overhead pressing). Those individuals who labor for a living routinely take items and place (press) them over the head onto something else. If you work around your home you're often placed in a position of extending the arms above the head to retrieve or replace a needed item. If you participate in outdoor activities, the roof of the car often may carry equipment such as a bike, canoe, or kayak. Therefore, I officially rank vertical pressing as my number one choice for upper-body strengthening movements.

Dumbbells are the perfect tool for vertical pressing for a number of reasons. They are well suited to the anatomy of the shoulder, allowing the glenohumeral joint to follow a natural path as the weight is pressed. Pressing a barbell is good stuff and solid training, but the movement of the shoulder is limited by that of the other shoulder and the placement of the bar. (Don't even talk to me about the Smith machine.) The shoulder girdle stabilizers are also taxed more with a dumbbell, since the weight has to be steadied in all planes throughout the motion. The movement may be

executed with a dumbbell or two and with a parallel, pronated, supinated, or combination grip. Moreover, pressing a single dumbbell has more transfer to real-world situations that require unilateral overhead lifting and reaching.

The anterior deltoids are the primary movers. Synergistic support comes from the lateral deltoids, supraspinatus, triceps, trapezius, serratus anterior, and pectoralis major. Pressing a single dumbbell also stresses the muscles of the trunk, with particular emphasis on the obliques.

Execution

Vertical pressing is so simple you can coach it in 180 seconds with practice. Begin with a stable base of support. Feet should be about hip- to shoulder-width



1 of 2

Dumbbell Vertical Press (continued...)

apart, with the weight distributed heel to mid-foot in a squared stance. The dumbbells begin at the shoulder in a racked position with the elbow below the wrist. To begin the press, tighten the abs like you are about to endure a body shot from Mike Tyson. From here squeeze the handle and push the load above the head by extending the elbow and shoulder. With heavier loads you may notice the upper body pressing away from the dumbbell as it reaches maximal extension. This is not a foul and is to be expected. From here, lower the dumbbell to the shoulder under control and repeat.

A more athletic, powerful version is the dumbbell push press. The push press is a skill transfer exercise from the weightlifting curriculum. To push press, begin with the start position of the vertical press. From here, load the springs by dipping with the hips and legs. Start the press by extending the hip and legs and let the momentum of that drive the initial phase of the lift, until the arms and shoulders take over and finish the press. The lower-body action increases the amount of muscle mass involved and therefore accelerates the energy cost of performing the move.

For athletes with lower-body injuries or other factors that prevent performing the lift in a standing position, vertical presses can be executed in a chair or on a bench. If the load cannot be pulled from the floor to the rack position, the dumbbell(s) can be handed to the athlete by a spotter or can be lifted from a rack, box, or stand.

A single-arm vertical press provides an excellent benchmark for assessing strength gains. I offer the following standards as a relative guide of strength.

Gold: 50% of body weight

Silver: 40% of body weight

Bronze: 30% of body weight

Time to get pressing: < 30% of body weight



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Michael Rutherford (a.k.a. Coach Rut) is the owner of [CrossFit Kansas City/Boot Camp Fitness](#). He has over a quarter-century of fitness coaching experience with athletes of all ages. He has also worked in hospital wellness environments and rehabilitation clinics. Coach Rut holds academic degrees in biology, physical education, and exercise physiology and sports biomechanics. He is a USAW-certified Club Coach and is a CrossFit level 3 trainer. He is also the current national Masters Champion in weightlifting at 94 kg.