

You CAN Gain Muscle Size and Strength After 50!

I turned 50 back in October of 2017. Having just turned 52, I'm the biggest and strongest I've been in my life. And no, I didn't just start working out a few years ago. I've lifted weights since my early 20s, and even competed in two amateur bodybuilding competitions back in 1993, at the age of 26. They were six weeks apart in the spring, and I took 3rd place in my division in the second contest. I wasn't huge, but for a natural I was pretty good size, decent strength and cut. I was at about a 200 to 205 pound body weight. Today I'm at about 220. Granted, there's a bit more body fat than in my lean competition days, but 15 to 20 pounds is a significant increase.

How is this possible, to be bigger and stronger now than in my bodybuilding prime? "Steroids"? No way, nothing illegal. All the supplements that I use are safe, natural over-the-counter items. But let's start with some basics.

What's Holding You Back?

If you're a guy in his 40s or 50s who's stayed pretty healthy most of his life, but you're feeling smaller and weaker than in your prime, that's completely natural. As we know, our bodies stop growing and producing certain chemicals as we age. Testosterone, somatotropin (growth hormone), and other chemicals start to lessen as we enter our 30s and 40s. If we don't stay active and healthy, our tissues – muscles, connective tissue and organs – will break down prematurely.

Maybe you haven't worked out much before, maybe occasionally, or you're a 2-3 times a week guy who's been following a moderate workout with plenty of cardio; a well-rounded, health conscious program. That's fine, and if your goal is to have general good health, then more power to you. There's still some great information here that can help you with your goals. I'm talking to the guy who wants not just his beach bod, but his big bod back. And I don't mean big around the middle. Most of us have that naturally at our age, and are fighting it every chance we get.

A decrease in size and strength can be compounded by injury, forcing us to take time off from the gym or sports to recover. Nothing wrong with giving the body time to rest and recuperate. If you don't get back at it hard and heavy, though, the gains are slower to come back than when you were in your 20 or 30s.

July 2020 update: as the coronavirus shutdowns have significantly changed the way we stay in shape, I've come up with some different ways of doing things. When gyms (and everything) first shut down in the latter part of March, I stopped working out. We have a decent weight set-up at my wife's gymnastics studio, but after a week of that, I stopped altogether. I took a total of 2 months off, ate junk, and generally fell out of shape. Then I got motivated again, near the end of May. I started going back regularly, starting light and easy. While my routines have been modified, i.e. pared down based on the equipment I have available, after a month I was back close to my original weights and reps in the major lifts like squat, bench, deadlift, dips and curls.

Some things I've done differently:

- *Focus on getting good sleep. My sleep habits have always been light and intermittent. With some discipline and a little Melatonin, I've been consistently getting 7 to 8 hours of deep, uninterrupted sleep a night. You've heard about it...it's true. It works.*
- *Work out with a partner. My 3 sons, in various combinations, have been working out with me for the last 4 to 6 weeks. In the past, I have usually worked out by myself. I'm not very social, and I don't like to chitchat when I'm in the gym. I want to get my work done, and go home to my family. I don't like my workouts taking more than an hour. But working out with the boys has greatly improved my lifts. One, you motivate each other to push harder. And two, you've got a spotter. Having a partner to spot on heavier lifts for bench or squat is huge. You are otherwise not going to push yourself beyond your comfort zone; thus, you won't grow.*

Muscle Memory

There is research on the idea of muscle memory – the kind that helps your muscles re-grow. Or, regain their original size and strength much faster the second, third and more times around. Many speculations have been vague at best, and some sources say that the idea of muscle memory from a regrowth standpoint is nonsense.

However, a study done in 2010 suggests that there is actual biological science behind this idea. It has been proven practically time and again. When we take an extended break from exercise, our muscles will lose size and strength. For example, and this is all hypothetical, numbers not exact: A bodybuilder with, say, 20-inch arms who gets injured and needs to take a 3 month break to recover might go down to an 18-inch arm size. Now, mind you – it's taken him years to build his 20-inch guns. But, when he returns to the gym, he hits it hard and heavy, and he's back where he left off in a matter of weeks.

This 2010 study shows the difference between skeletal muscle cells and normal cells. Most cells have one nucleus, which is the “brain” that manages cell function. Muscle cells have many nuclei, to manage their growth and functioning. Each nucleus covers one small area of the cell. As a muscle cell is forced into growth, or hypertrophy, it develops more nuclei to help handle the added area needing managed. What was found was that during an extensive “de-training” period, or rest/rehab time, the muscle cells atrophied, or shrank – but they retained the same number of nuclei. For more information on this, see the link under “Sources” at the end of the article.

So, when you go back to work in the gym, the muscle cells still have their managers to handle cell growth and function...at their previous size and strength. So unlike original growth, which takes longer because you're building the entire muscle cell up from scratch, including the added nuclei, now you've just got to re-energize the tissue, and the managers will take care of it from there.

So, with all that in mind, you can see how it's very possible – and really pretty easy – for me to get at least as big and as strong as I was in my mid-20s. And the best part...the more we continue to work hard and build, then the muscles will continue growing.

DIET...and Exercise

I've tried many different diets, workout regimens, and supplementation over the years. My gym routine has varied from slightly to not-at-all around hockey. So this past spring, as I took the usual summer off of hockey, I decided I was going to get serious about weight training, and see what I could do with it. Here's a breakdown of my diet and supplementation.

- I take a pre-workout blend of BCAAs (branch-chain amino acids, in a flavored powder), along with a pre-workout that's a mix of caffeine and other natural ingredients to help you get and stay pumped. I put these two together and drink about half of it about 20 minutes before I head to the gym. I'll drink the rest by the time I'm at the gym and warmed up.
- After the workout, I'll make a protein shake with a high-quality whey protein, about 3-4 tablespoons of natural peanut butter, a banana and 3-4 raw eggs. The milk I use varies - usually just regular 2%, but I'll also split that with a chocolate almond milk with plant protein (not soy) if it's in the fridge.
- On top of the pre-workout mix and post-workout protein shake, I'll eat. Seefood diet - I see it, I eat it. I don't eat much sugar or junk, but I do love burgers. I do have a healthy mix of vegetables, which I'll explain later on, and generally healthy foods. But if you want to get big, you have to eat big. Period.
- For about the past year, I've taken a natural testosterone booster. This product (along with all the others I take) is available at any GNC store, or online at their website. It's a good one, and works well. It contains all-natural herbal and organic ingredients, and isn't adding any hormones to your system.
- For the last month, I've also added a natural GH booster. Again, this product consists of natural amino acids and herbal and natural ingredients that promote rest, anti-anxiety and anti-depression, help improve memory, but most importantly, help the body produce more of its own GH while you sleep.

I'll cover more on the boosters later. On that last topic of food. It really is true, it's more about the diet than the exercise, whatever your plan is. Don't get me wrong, you're not going to get big and strong, or lean and cut, by sitting on the couch in front of the TV just "eating the right things". The exercise is definitely important, an obvious very-close second to the diet. But the diet will make or break your results. And if you're a meat-and-potatoes guy, or just a meat guy who can't stand vegetables, you gotta learn to love 'em. There are different ways to do this, here are my two go-to methods:

- I hate leaves. I've tried, but I will only eat a salad if I'm at Olive Garden. I try eating salads at home. I know kale is good for you, and I'll occasionally get some of that. But I don't really eat leafy greens. But I do drink...V8 juice. "I could've had a V8!" The only downside to V8 juice is you're not getting the fiber from the whole veggie. But, as long as you're eating other foods with fiber – whole grains, oatmeal, beans, and fruit – V8 offers all the vitamins and minerals of a great vegetable mix.

- Last year I discovered a great recipe for a soup. It's more like a stew once you're done with it, but it is amazing. I do like chunky vegetables. It's tomato and cabbage-based, with onion, red bell peppers, and other ingredients as you see fit. I add brussels sprouts, carrots and celery. No starchy vegetables. It's really good and it helps maintain your weight, even helps you lose a few extra pounds.

Lean, Mean Machine

If your goal is to build a lean, healthy physique with a good amount of strength and muscle mass, the keto diet works very well. I inadvertently fell into this at the beginning of 2018, and tried it for 3 months. The results were really great. I lost body fat and a few pounds, while maintaining my strength level. After the first month or so, I coupled it with intermittent fasting – more on that later if you're unfamiliar with it – and I had more energy and mental clarity during the day than, well, I can't remember when.

Both of these eating plans have been established for some time, but if you're unfamiliar with them, here are the basics and then you can check out some links at the end for more information.

The ketogenic diet puts your body in a state of ketosis - in layman's terms, this means that your body stops using carbohydrates for energy and instead turns to your fat stores. The diet consists of some proteins (adjustable depending on your workout level), plenty of vegetables, and fats. Yep, you need to eat fat to lose fat. Notice anything missing? Carbs. No more (or very little) bread, pasta, cereal, etc. You can eat some carbs, but they should be healthy, complex ones like beans, oatmeal, or potatoes. No processed foods. And no more than 20% of your daily intake. If you go beyond the 20%, your body will not enter ketosis and you'll continue to burn carbs, not fat.

Trust me, it works. I couldn't believe the results. Mainly, because they started pretty quick...within the first week, my energy level and mental alertness had noticeably increased. After about 10 days, I saw the first couple of pounds start coming off, while my results in the gym continued to climb. Learn to love avocados, butter and cream cheese. They can be your best friends.

The intermittent fasting took it to the next level. This is easier to explain, as it's really just a schedule of when and how often you eat. Ideally, on an intermittent fast your first meal isn't until about 12:00 pm. Lunch is your breakfast. If you're one of those people who can't survive without breakfast, ease into it. Start by delaying breakfast by an hour, and then eat less than normal. Keep up the delay treatment until you've stretched it until 11:00, then it's easy.

Your first meal can be a big one, because you're only going to eat between noon and 6 to 8 pm. The school of thought behind intermittent fasting is that your body takes in all the nutrients it needs in just a few small meals, or only one or two large meals. Most Americans are in the habit of fast food and snacking, and it really is excessive overload for our bodies. Pro bodybuilders adhere to intermittent fasting, especially during their "cutting" season when they're preparing for a competition.

I got down to around two large meals, around noon or 1:00 and then again when I got home at 5:00. And that would be it. I actually slept better at night without any food in my system. The results were fantastic. As I said, the energy and mental clarity were at an all-time high...no more waking up groggy when the alarm went off. I was up and making coffee, sitting down to my computer to check e-mails instead of "vegging out" half-asleep until I absolutely had to get in the shower. And I went from about 225 pounds down to around 210, 212. And again, as strong as ever. It was fat cutting. My abs were definitely more defined. I was skating better than I had in years, more alert and mobile on the ice. It was amazing.

To Boost Or Not To...?

So about those boosters I mentioned earlier. You might be thinking, "Ah-hah! I knew you were doing something shady to get the crazy results you were talking about!" Well, let's see - I'm a competitive guy who lifts weights and still plays hockey at nearly 52 years old. In both arenas, I constantly have younger guys around me - in hockey, it affects me directly because it's hard to keep up with a 40-year-old who just came into the league, as my speed and reflexes have slowed some in the last 10 years. So, yes, I'm going to take advantages when I can. BUT...they're not shady or illegal. As I mentioned, they are easily available over the counter or even on Amazon. They've got natural herbal and other organic ingredients to help your body increase natural outputs of vital hormones to help you think, remember, sleep better and yes, get bigger and stronger.

It's not adding anything to your body, it's simply "opening the faucet" - getting your body to produce more of its own naturally. Taking steroids is adding synthetic anabolics to your body. Your body is very good at monitoring and maintaining its own chemical levels. Once your body's sensors detect increased hormone levels due to the synthetic steroids, it will slow down and eventually shut off its own production of natural testosterone. This is obviously not natural or healthy, and it's why athletes who use steroids long-term have to cycle off of them for a while, in order to kick-start their body into producing its own natural levels again. Long-term use of steroids can increase LDL cholesterol, decrease HDL cholesterol, damage your liver, kidneys and heart, among other things.

With HGH (somatropin, Growth Hormone) injections, there are a bunch of negative side effects that can happen, particularly in older men. One list I found (rxlist.com, norditropin side effects) listed no less than 25, many of which were mild such as headaches, feeling tired, and cold symptoms. Some of the big hitters I found, though, among several expert sites include:

- carpal tunnel syndrome,
- increased insulin resistance,
- swelling in the arms and legs (edema),
- joint and muscle pain,
- high blood pressure,
- increased LDL cholesterol.

All in all, they're not a good idea and I would never condone their use. I believe you can have a long, healthy life with all the size and strength you'll ever need naturally. But it takes discipline

and hard work. And, it depends on your personal beliefs on the matter. For a long time, I wouldn't even take the boosters. I figured, this is the body that God gave me, and I'm in really good shape for my age, so I'll just keep working at it naturally. I still firmly believe that, and I probably won't keep using the boosters long-term. It's fun to watch my progress continue in the gym, but I know a couple of things: one, I won't want to keep up this pace forever; and two, it's expensive and I'll eventually want to save or spend my money elsewhere.

I hope I've helped you make some good decisions about your health and fitness. My goal is to inform to the best of my ability through first-hand experience, and some research. As always, when in doubt of anything you've read or heard, do some research of your own. Look up several sources on a given topic and compare, contrast what they say. This helps you whittle down information into the most accurate finding. Good luck, God bless and stay healthy.

SOURCES & LINKS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

1. Beginner's Keto Diet Plan: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z15Z1-Og_pg

Thomas DeLauer is one of the top experts in dieting and exercise. He's got tons of videos on the keto diet – what to and not to eat, beginner and advanced advice.

2. Intermittent Fasting: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LLVf3d0rqqY>

Again, Thomas DeLauer is one of the best that I've found to not only explain dieting and fasting, but how and why they work.

3. Fasting & Keto – Put The Two Together: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7zsLPiBXEUA>

4. The science behind muscle memory: <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2019/01/190125084106.htm>