

Cross Fit – Friend, Fad or Foe?

If you're involved in the fitness community even a little bit the chances are that you've heard of CrossFit. Particularly with recent endorsements by Reebok and the popularization of the CrossFit Games, this fitness program is becoming more and more popular with both the fitness community and the mainstream public.



CrossFit is a strength and conditioning program, with the goal of improving fitness. It prides itself on constantly varied, high intensity, functional workouts that are broad, general, and inclusive to all. Workouts involve weight lifting or weight training, sprinting or distance running and gymnastics. Workouts are typically short—20 minutes or less—and intense, demanding all-out physical exertion. They have a tendency to use a fixed time and maximum reps are completed in the set timeframe. They combine movements such as sprinting, rowing, jumping rope, climbing rope, flipping tires, weightlifting, and carrying odd objects; they use barbells, dumbbells, gymnastics rings, pull-up bars, kettlebells, medicine balls, boxes for box jumps, and many bodyweight exercises. The CrossFit program is designed for universal scalability making it achievable to all individuals regardless of experience. They use the same routines for everyone, scaling load and intensity; rather than altering programs.

Cross Fit can be completed at an affiliated gym with certified CrossFit trainers, or at home/in the office using workouts and instructions off the CrossFit website. However, most people find it too difficult without the right equipment and trainer present. CrossFit classes are offered to members and usually include a generalized warm-up session, skill development and then a high-intensity workout that lasts from 10-to-20 minutes. Each day a new workout is posted on the CrossFit website known as the 'workout of the day' or the 'WOD', this is completed as the high intensity part of the class. Scoring and ranking of the 'WOD' is usually displayed at each gym and can be posted on the website to increase motivation and create competition. The short intense workouts result in quick improvements in strength, power, endurance and weight loss and this has made the franchise very popular. Despite these results, there are

still many exercise experts that are troubled by many "fad" aspects within the system - particularly the lack of guidance for beginners.

One should never base their decision of taking part in a workout program based solely on reputation and word of mouth. With all exercise programs, precautions and research should be taken before beginning the program to minimize injury risk and ensure goals are achieved. Many people are being injured at CrossFit due to the high intensity ballistic exercises and their lack of initial fitness. So what are the common injuries, the pros and cons, and what precautions need to be taken to keep the CrossFit workouts safe?



Pros of Cross Fit

1. **Time Frame** - It can take less than 15 minutes a day because that quarter of an hour is going to be condensed, non-stop movement. This makes it easy to fit into your busy schedule.
2. **Intensity Level** - CrossFit is performance-oriented and always pushes you to your limits— The intensity is maximal. Which means increased calorie burn, and fast improvements in muscle strength, endurance, power, anaerobic and cardiovascular fitness.
3. **Workout Variation** - The fact that the workouts vary so greatly from day to day means the body is always guessing. It never has the chance to settle into that "workout groove" where it knows what's coming. This sets the body up for adaptation and slower metabolic response. CrossFit also allows you to train your cardiovascular fitness whilst improving muscular strength killing two birds with one stone. The variety also prevents boredom and keeps the individual motivated.
4. **Comradery** – CrossFit is performed in a group setting with a CrossFit coach. Many exercises include partners so you have to work together. The coaches push you, but also support you and motivate you. The group setting can also allow for some friendly competition. The competition between peers and yourself improves performance.

Cons of Cross Fit

1. **Injury risk** - Many of the exercises in cross fit are high intensity and involve heavy lifting; this increases the risk of injury. CrossFit also focuses on maximal reps in a fixed amount of time. This can alter and reduce your form which means you are not correctly doing the exercise and creates a greater chance of injury. It also raises the big issue of quantity Vs quality. It is far more beneficial and safe to perform an exercise correctly, targeting the desired muscle group to a lesser quantity than do it more but 'cheat' and use incorrect technique



2. **Lack of individualized program** - It's kind of a "one size fits all" type of program. The coaches are there and will coach you as to how much weight you should be using but as for personalisation

exercise wise the program is almost the same for all people so workouts are not tailored to the individual's specific needs or goals. Also, individuals coming in with flexibility, or strength imbalance issues, progress will be limited and injury risk high.

3. **Lack of direction/support for new members** - Experts believe there is a clear lack of direction, support, and information for new athletes or others who are new to the CrossFit system. This only makes it easier for new members to perform inappropriate exercises and increase injury risk. For those who cannot perform the common exercises of CrossFit, there are few alternatives. It leaves many with the mindset of "if you cannot perform, you do not belong."
4. **Lack of supervision** – As stated above there is one trainer and many participants. They cannot possibly ensure everyone's technique is correct and that everyone is lifting the correct weight for their ability.

Common injuries

1. **Neck and back pain** – When you are lifting such heavy weights again and again, all it takes is one lift with bad form and weak abdominal muscles to feel the sharp jab of pain.

Whether it's in the neck, between the shoulder blades or in the lower back it's a lengthy rehabilitation that you didn't need. If you have any current or previous back or neck pain consult with your physiotherapist before you begin Cross fit.

- 2. Shoulders** – Again due to the huge weights lifted often in combination with poor technique the shoulder joint comes off second best. Weakness of the shoulder stabilizing muscles often begins due to repeated overhead lifts or pulls ups to fatigue point. If untreated this weakness can lead to shoulder instability, impingement or tendinopathy. Shoulder injuries should NOT be taken lightly, if left untreated they may need surgery.

Always contact your physiotherapy if you have any shoulder pain, instability or feel a tweak whilst working out.

- 3. Knee** – It is important to remember when walking up stairs or squatting the knee experiences pressure up to 8x your body weight. Now imagine doing a squat jump or box jumps at Cross Fit. The force through the knees is extreme. Furthermore, the knee is intricately connected to the pelvis, hip, upper and lower legs, ankles and feet, so if there is any muscular or biomechanical imbalance at these levels then the knees suffer. Muscular imbalance can lead to misalignment of the knee-cap; this causes pain, swelling, and inflammation. Many times knee injuries are simply manifestations of other areas of weakness that fail to support the knee. If you have any pre-existing knee pain Cross Fit may not be appropriate for you.



While all of these injuries can be prevented, there is no 100% fool proof training plan that guarantees health and safety. Like any extreme sport, caution and common sense go a long way, especially in CrossFit. If you have any concerns regarding current or previous injuries screening from your physiotherapist will decrease injury risk.

Tips – To survive CrossFit

- 1. Do your research** – Are your workout goals going to be achieved with CrossFit? Do you have the base fitness and knowledge to begin? Do you have any current injuries to sort out before beginning the program?

2. **Start Slow and keep hydrated**- Circuit intensity needs to be worked into slowly so you know your body's response. Dehydration is a serious risk factor. No explosive or overhead lifts for time or in a fatigued state.
3. **Don't do every day** - If you are attending too many Cross fit workouts in the week you can end up overtraining and may end up with serious injuries or illnesses. These sessions require much more recovery time than a regular workout would.
4. **Listen to the trainer** – If you are advised to change your technique or slow down LISTEN.
5. **Listen to your body** – If your body's screaming to stop due to pain rather than exhaustion is an immediate sign to stop. Also, most injuries occur when the muscle or individual is fatigued, so monitor how you're feeling and whether pushing to exhaustion is appropriate for that workout. Make sure you stretch, roll out, self massage after each session and take care of your body.
6. **Perfect technique before increasing your load** – It is far safer and beneficial to do the workout at a lower weight with perfect technique than to increase the weight with poor technique. Bad technique = injuries.
7. **Sort out your problems** – Don't train through your niggles. Consult your preferred health practitioner if you feel any aches or pains.
8. **Cross fit is not for the unfit** – If you haven't exercised in years join a gym or complete bootcamp first – build up your muscular strength, endurance and cardiovascular fitness before you embark on CrossFit. This is a highly-refined system of exercises and training programs that are geared toward the more experienced athlete.

