

Of the three powerlifts, the bench, by far, has the greatest number of assistance exercises aimed at its increase. They range from pec exercises like flyes and inclines, lat exercises like chins and rows, shoulder exercises like laterals and overhead presses, to tricep exercises like dips and extensions. Because of the great variety of assistance exercises available for the bench, many lifters tend to overtrain the lift and may end up with a stalled bench press. As I've said before, the best way to increase your bench is to bench, but some assistance work can definitely help. The trouble is, what assistance move gives the best bang for the buck? In this author's opinion, it's the close grip bench press.

Unlike the other exercises I mentioned earlier, like dips and laterals, the close grip bench press is very similar to the actual bench

press itself. This similarity results in more transferable gains from close grips to the regular bench. However, their distinct dissimilarities result in that slightly different effect on the benching musculature that yields positive results. Let's begin with a description of the close grip bench.

Basically, 'close grips' are regular benches done with a slightly narrower than shoulder width grip. This narrow or 'close' grip effectively overloads the all-important triceps by lessening the contribution of the pecs. The shoulders and lats stay status quo, more or less. The triceps are prime movers in the bench with most of their contribution coming during the beginning and end of the press and may be the key limiting factor in the lift. Close grips are mostly a tricep exercise with some assistance from the chest, delts, and lats. Since close grips are not a strict isolation move like tricep extension and are a multi-joint exercise, more weight can be used. I have also found that when I tried to put more work into my triceps by doing extensions, dips, etc., I tended to suffer from sore elbows eventually. Because close grips are multi-joint, the brunt of the weight was shared by a greater muscle mass, hence less soreness and pain.

Many lifters who do use close grips as an assistance exercise for the bench, do not perform it in the best and safest manner. Too many lifters interpret close grip as a really close grip with their hands inches apart or even touching. Such execution is counterproductive. Too close of a grip causes undue strain on the wrists due to the decreased control of the bar itself. Also safety is sacrificed, again due to the decreased control of the bar during the lift. With a grip slightly narrower

THE BENCH

Close Grip Bench Pressing

as told to PL USA by DOUG DANIELS

than shoulder width, which is still close relative to a normal grip, more weight can be used and a higher degree of lifting safety can be achieved, all with intense stimulation of the triceps. It's a win-win situation! I have found the best place to hit the chest in close grips is just below the nipple area. The leverage of this lift is different enough to require a little adjustment to it. Since there is less pec contribution in this lift and the triceps do more of

the lifting, hard reps tend to fail just after the midpoint of the lift. The bad thing is that the bar tends to fall back to the chest rather quickly right after it stalls. This requires even more alert spotting than normal. I can't stress the importance of alert spotting enough. Lifters take sufficient chances with injury during training and competition to have to add bad spotting to the risks.

Application of close grips is last. Reps and sets are up to you.

They're best done after your regular benches and can stand alone as your only assistance move for your pushing muscles. For those of you who are hard gainers, I would suggest one workout on the bench itself, with a second workout, 3-4 days later, of just close grips. This simple schedule can give superior results if you apply close grips as I just described.

I realized the value of close grips when I started to learn about training from my friend, Jim Vrabel. They were and still are Jim's favorite assistance exercise for the bench. Another friend of mine and a world record holder, Chris Confessore, also works hard on these. These two guys speak volumes for this exercise's value to the lifter. I hope I provided you with some clues to more productive powerlifting training. Give close grips a try.



Chris Confessore recently benched 605 weighing 205 in competition, and will go 198 later on this year