

A black and white photograph of a shirtless man with a beard and short hair. He is holding a large, textured kettlebell with both hands, positioned at waist level. The kettlebell has a label that reads "ONNIT" and "28".

# THE BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO KETTLEBELLS

We're willing to bet that most people get interested in the kettlebell for one reason: **it looks damn cool.**

A black cannonball with a cast-iron handle, no other training tool can match its old-school, back-to-basics appeal.

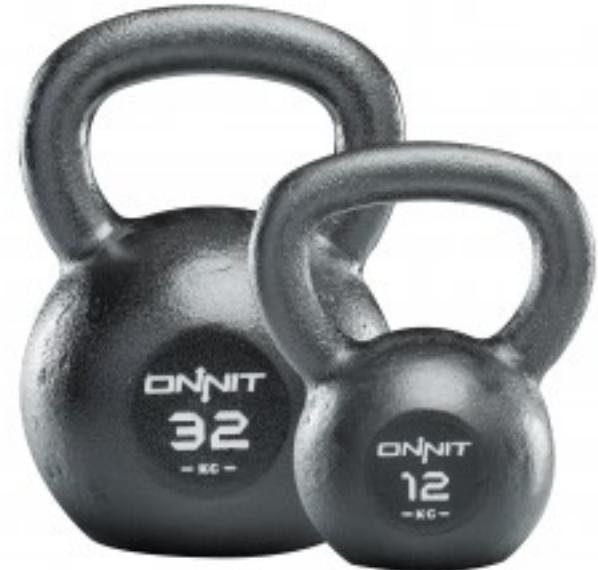
And while the cool factor is a good enough reason to start using one, there are many others that will inspire you to stick with kettlebell training long-term and make it a regular part of your workouts.

Whether you're looking to get started with your first bell tomorrow, or you want a quick refresher course on everything that makes kettlebells indispensable, look no further than the guide that follows, which covers everything you need to know to start making gains right away.

Part of the kettlebell's mystique lies in its humble origins. Kettlebells debuted in 18th-century Russia, where they were used as counterweights to measure grain and other dry goods.

It wasn't long before farmers started challenging each other to lift the heaviest ones, and kettlebells eventually found their way into the hands of circus strongmen.

After World War II, the Soviet Red Army adopted kettlebells as a means of training its soldiers, and in the 1970s, kettlebell lifting had grown to become



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the official sport of the Soviet Union.

While kettlebells have been available in the United States since the 1940s, they've enjoyed a resurgence in popularity since the turn of the century and are now widely available in gyms and for sale online and in stores.

## **Anatomy Of A Kettlebell**

The kettlebell comprises a bell, handle, and "horns." The bell itself is the round, cannon-ball shaped weight. The handle connects to the kettlebell by sloping downward at each end, called the horns.

This design is what makes kettlebells unique. Unlike a dumbbell, in which a handle connects two evenly-weighted bells and lies level in the center between them, a kettlebell's center of gravity is offset from its handle—it rests several inches away.

The kettlebell can be grasped by the handle, horns, or its bell end. Gripping the kettlebell by its handle will be your mainstay, but exercises like the squat are more user-friendly if you grasp the horns to do it.

For a greater grip challenge on a move like rowing, you may choose to hold the kettlebell by the bell itself, which will force your hand to squeeze harder to prevent slipping.

## **The Benefits of Kettlebell Training**



## Better Form

The main thing that distinguishes the kettlebell from its dumbbell cousin is the off-set nature of the load. A kettlebell's center of gravity lies six to eight inches away from your grip (when gripping the handle, anyway), and that makes it harder to control.

As a result, practically any exercise you do with it—from conventional strength movements like presses and squats to more unique kettlebell exercises like swings and snatches—is going to require stricter form and more muscle activation than you could get away with using a dumbbell.

Consider an overhead press for example. “It’s funny how, with barbells and dumbbells, so many people are happy to press to where their elbows are bent 90 degrees,” says Shane Heins, Director of Fitness Education for the Onnit Academy. “But with the kettlebell, everybody instinctively wants to press up to lockout, because the off-set load acts as a counter-weight, pulling their shoulder back.”

In other words, the kettlebell encourages you to do the exercise perfectly. And if you can't—say, you arch your back or twist to one side in an effort to complete the lift—you know immediately when your form has broken (or if you don't, a skilled trainer or training partner who's watching you will).

Squatting with the kettlebell held in front of your body forces you to sit back more on the descent, improving the mechanics of your squat pattern.

That paves the way for you to perform more advanced (and arguably more glamorous) exercises properly when you graduate to them—such as a heavy barbell back squat.

## **Improved Core Strength**

As stated above, pressing a kettlebell overhead will create the tendency to flare your ribs or lean back, so you have to lock your core in that much more to prevent it.

In a swing, you have to brace your core to prevent your lower back from rounding dangerously at the bottom of the movement. On any exercise you do, you can count on your core having to fire harder to stabilize your body and ensure safety—it's not optional as it can be with other free weights or machines.

## **Improved Athleticism**

If you're an athlete of any kind, kettlebell training better simulates the constantly shifting center of gravity you encounter on the field, mat, or court than most conventional lifting does.

Other objects, whether a ball, obstacle, or opposing player, rarely stand still during competition. Using kettlebells teaches your body to stabilize itself and produce force despite the chaos of movement.

Furthermore, exercises like swings, clean and jerks, and snatches (the latter

two are more user-friendly when done with kettlebells than a loaded barbell) build power that translates directly to sports.

If your training lacks explosive movements, kettlebells are a good place to start training them.

## **Greater Grip Strength**

The kettlebell handle, coupled with the displaced load, requires your fingers, hands, and forearms to work harder to control it than they would on a dumbbell.

While some manufacturers promote a thick handle, a narrower one will make it easier to perform more complex movements, which increases your training options (more on this later under “How To Choose A Kettlebell”).

As grip strength is important in most sports as well as for overall strength gain in general, kettlebells are an exceptional tool.

## **Stronger Cardiovascular Endurance**

Most kettlebell exercises integrate the entire body, and many, such as classics like the clean and press and snatch, involve lifting the weight from the floor to overhead. Working muscles across the body over such a wide range of motion creates tremendous demand on the heart.

As a result, many athletes use kettlebells as a cornerstone of their conditioning programs.

## **Easy Portability**

Next to exercise bands and a suspension trainer, kettlebells are the easiest training tool to travel with. They won’t roll around in the back of your car like dumbbells might, and they wouldn’t look out of place on a beach or at the park.

Plus, unlike with dumbbells, you really only need a single kettlebell to get a great workout.

“There’s a huge library of exercises that you can use with one weight,” says John Wolf, Onnit’s Chief Fitness Officer. “A lot of times with dumbbells, you need a huge selection to do your workout. With kettlebells, you might need two weight increments to work your whole body. I’ve always said that if you have one kettlebell in the corner of your room you basically have a gym.”

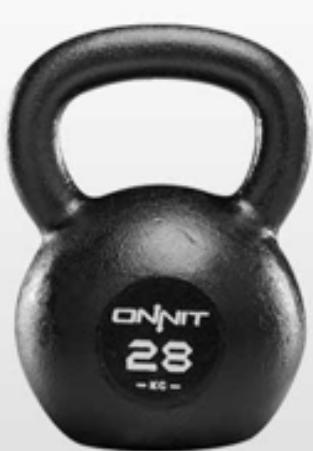
## The Science

A 2013 study by the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse examined the effects of kettlebell training on healthy male and female volunteers, ages 19 to 25—all of whom were experienced in strength training.

The subjects had their strength, aerobic capacity, and balance tested with conventional exercises first and then spent eight weeks training with kettlebells, performing lifts that included swings, snatches, cleans, and presses. Afterward, the same battery of conventional lifts were used to measure progress.

The result? The subjects’ strength improved, but core strength in particular jumped 70%. Aerobic capacity increased 13.8%. The participants’ ability to balance also improved significantly, which the researchers cited as being especially valuable to older adults who take up strength training.

## How To Choose A Kettlebell



KETTLE BELLS



PRIMAL BELLS



ZOMBIE BELLS



LEGEND BELLS

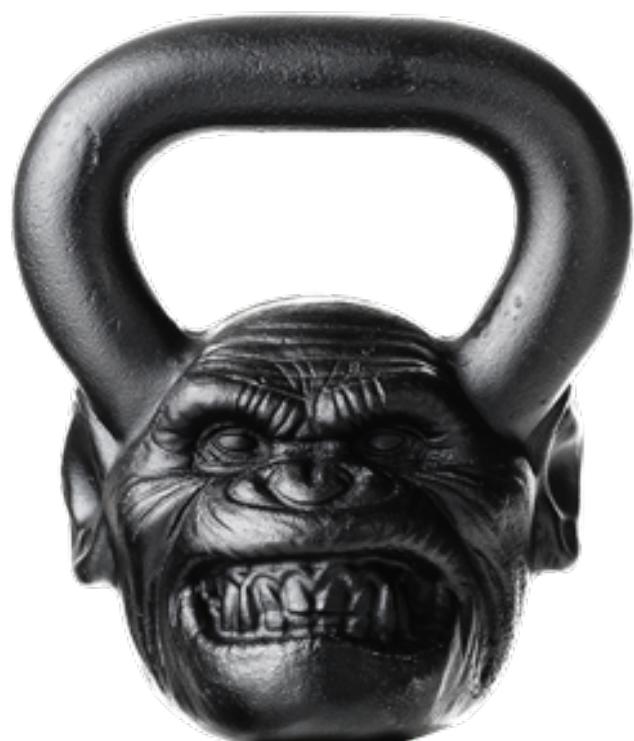
Kettlebell designs vary. Some are coated in rubber to protect floors from impact. Others are designed specifically for kettlebell lifting competitions and have a straight handle and are uniform in size regardless of weight.

In an attempt to appeal to beginners, a few manufacturers make kettlebells with concave faces, which are intended to be more ergonomic. Some newfangled kettlebells work like dumbbells and can be loaded with plates, offering multiple weight changes with one implement.

The classic kettlebell, however, is a solid weight made of cast iron and offers a round bell and curved handle, and that's the type we recommend for the widest range of uses.

So-called user-friendly, ergonomic kettlebells that feature concave bells simply aren't necessary if you know how to lift a kettlebell with good technique (and they're usually poor quality).

Plate-loaded kettlebells may seem convenient and cost-effective, but they



[Kettlebell](#) Swings and getups burn fat and get your heart rate up as well as any cardio machine, but do

present problems. “It will increase the likelihood of injury,” says Wolf. “A plate slamming into your forearm instead of a rounded object is going to hurt more.” Plus, if you don’t load the plates correctly, and they go flying off, you’ve got bigger problems than just fitting in a workout that day.

more to re-enforce good mechanics.

Competition bells are obviously ideal if you have ambitions to compete, and while the handle is well-suited for contested lifts like the clean, jerk, and snatch, Wolf says it doesn’t provide the same variety of grips that you can use with the more rounded handle of the classic kettlebell model. “You can use two hands on a conventional kettlebell—even one with a small handle.

“But on a competition one, with its squared handle, you can only use as many fingers as can fit in the space the handle provides. For a good number of people out there, especially those with larger hands, that space is not enough.”

If you’re buying a kettlebell in person, perform this test before making a final decision. Hold up your hand and touch your thumb to the tip of your pinkie.

Notice the channel it forms in your palm—that’s where the kettlebell handle should rest most of the time, from the outside knuckle of the index finger diagonally down to the opposite side of the wrist. (This will be your primary grip for most conventional kettlebell lifts, such as pressing and squatting.) Pick up the weight and hold the handle in the middle, letting it fill that channel. “The bell should rest on the back of your forearm when the wrist is straight,” says Heins.

“It should not impinge on the boney profile of the wrist,” adds Wolf. If you pick up a kettlebell that rubs against the bone that protrudes on the lateral side of your wrist, the weight displacement from the handle is not ideal, and you could end up getting injured.

**Another safety tip:** don’t use a kettlebell with too thick a handle. “Onnit’s

handles are a little over an inch in diameter,” says Wolf, which is enough to work your grip but not so demanding to hold that it creates unnecessary fatigue. “When you’re performing an exercise like the swing, you may be doing hundreds of reps in a workout, as opposed to four sets of eight,” or some other standard set-and-rep-scheme you’d use with conventional exercises. “We don’t want your grip to burn out. I think that’s counterproductive from a technique standpoint. Once someone’s grip is overworked, you’ll see a whole slew of mechanical problems that come into play.”

As for how much weight to start with, men can invest in one or two bells that are 16 kilos (about 35 pounds). Wolf says that will provide plenty of challenge on a wide range of exercises. “For gals, an eight-kilo kettlebell [17.5 pounds] will give you a lot of bang for your buck.”

## The 7 Best Kettlebell Exercises For Beginners



The same basic lifts that make barbell and dumbbell training so effective can

be done with kettlebells for a unique twist. We suggest you start with the following. (Note the subtle tweaks in form that must be made to accommodate the kettlebell.)

In addition, there are some exercises that are unique to kettlebells alone and, while they may seem awkward at first, can pay quick dividends no matter what your training goals.

## 1. Kettlebell Goblet Squat

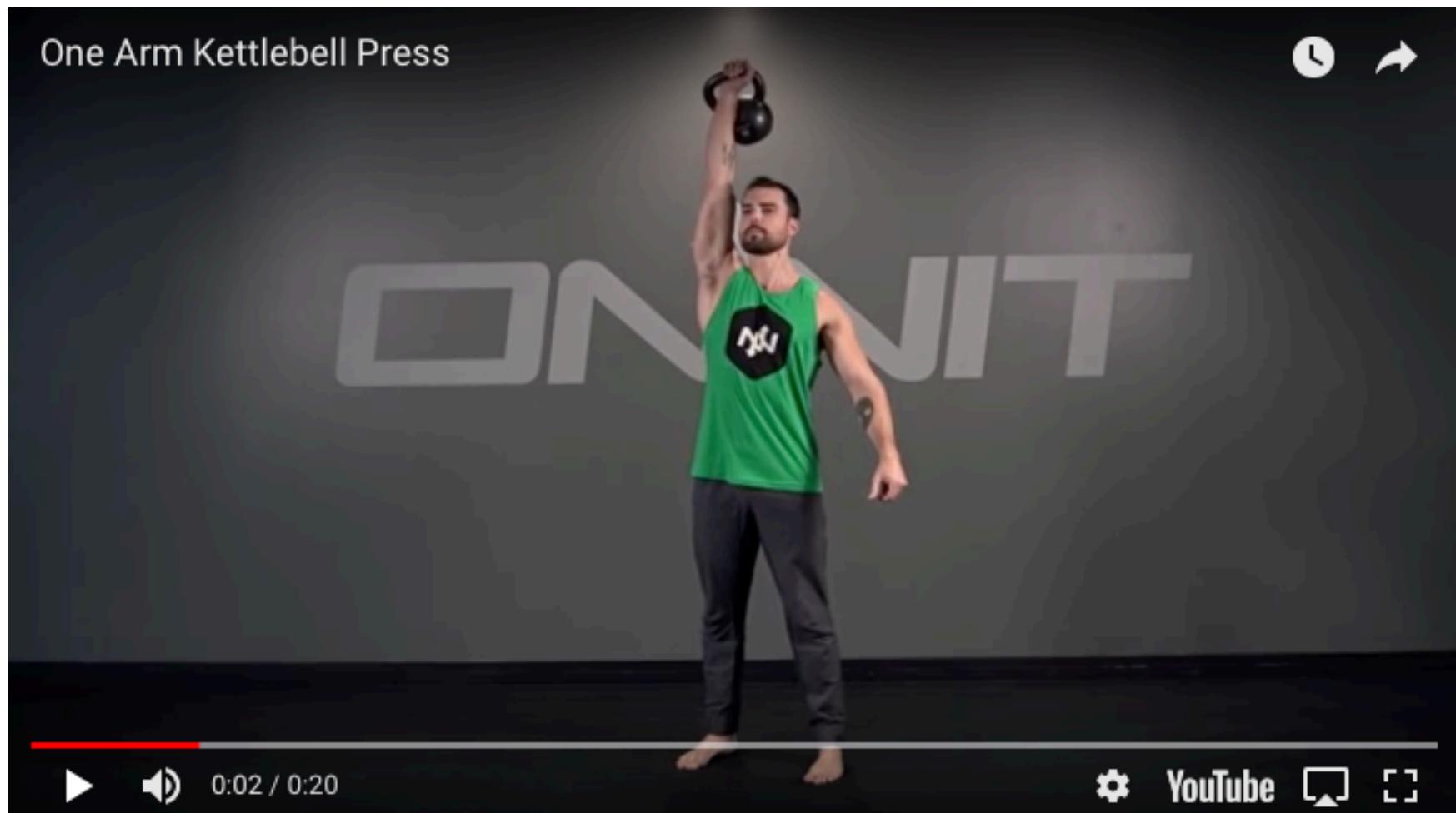


Hold the kettlebell by its horns and drive your shoulder blades together and downward so your chest is open (think “proud chest”). Tuck your elbows in so your forearms are vertical.

Stand with feet a bit wider than hip-width apart with feet turned out slightly. Take a deep breath into your belly and twist your feet into the ground (imagine screwing them down without actually moving them) and squat, keeping your torso upright.

Go as low as you can without your tailbone tucking under your butt.

## 2. One-Arm Overhead Press



Stand tall holding the kettlebell in one hand at shoulder level. Root your feet into the floor as if you were preparing for someone to push you. Take a deep breath into your belly and brace your abs and glutes.

Pull your ribs down and think “proud chest” and “long spine” so your tailbone is tilted up slightly. Press the weight overhead. Note that your chin should be pulled back so that weight has no trouble clearing it.

To lower the kettlebell, pull it back down into position—as if you were performing a pullup.

**TIP:** “Don’t get fixated on achieving a full overhead lockout right away,” says Wolf. “Just going to where your elbow is bent 90 degrees and holding it isometrically is a ton of work for most people.”

As mentioned earlier, if you need to arch your back, causing your ribs to flare in order to lock out your arm overhead, you’re not training the shoulder effectively.

In that case, you may need to regress the movement to a floor press—lie down on the floor with your triceps against it and press upward from there (think of it as a bench press with a shortened range of motion).

### 3. Kettlebell Deadlift



Place the kettlebell on the floor between your feet and stand with feet hip-width apart. Bend your knees slightly and push your butt back, screwing your feet into the floor as you lower your torso until your arms can grasp the kettlebell handle.

Think “proud chest,” and keep your lower back in its natural arch. Focus your eyes ahead of you and slightly down.

Grasp the kettlebell with both hands and take a deep breath into your belly. Drive through your heels to lift the bell up, extending your hips to lockout.

### 4. Kettlebell One-Arm Row



0:05 / 0:22



YouTube



Place the kettlebell on the floor and take a staggered stance with your right foot in front. Your foot should be planted just outside the weight. Dig the ball of your left foot into the floor behind you, folding at the hips as you sit your butt back so your torso is angled about 45 degrees to the floor. Rest your right elbow on your right thigh for support and reach for the kettlebell with your left hand.

Take a deep belly breath and draw your shoulders back and together (“proud chest”). Brace your core and row the weight back to your hip, squeezing your shoulder blades together at the top.

## 5. Kettlebell Chest-Loaded Swing



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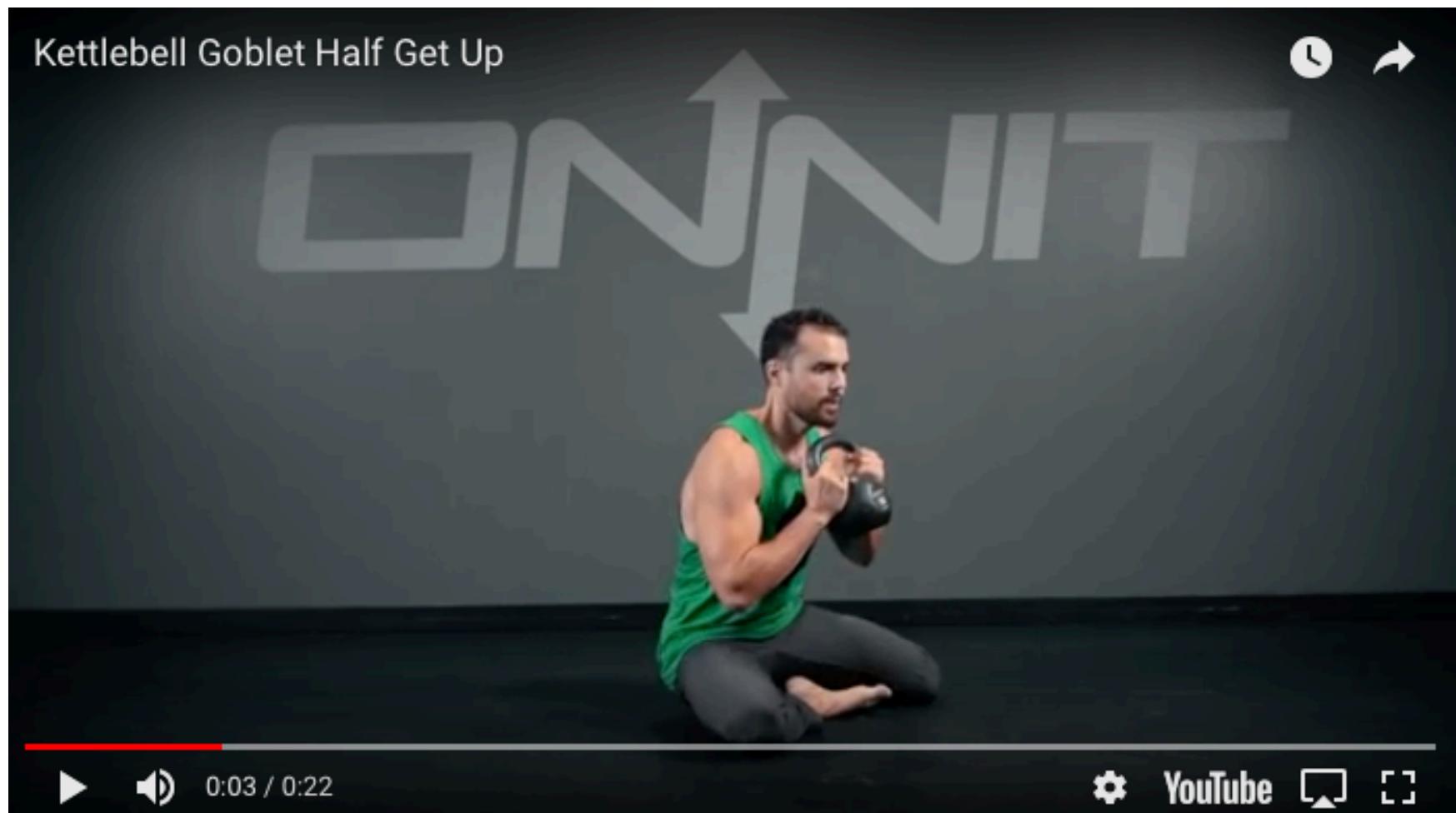
“The swing is the definitive kettlebell exercise, as proliferated by social media,” says Wolf. “But we feel like people jump into that pool way too fast.” Most swings you’ll see in the gym (or on YouTube) aren’t done safely—at the risk of serious lower-back injury.

It’s important for people not familiar with it to learn to hinge with their hips, which lays the foundation for all deadlift variations and explosive exercises like snatches and cleans. For that reason, Wolf and Heins propose that you start with the chest-loaded swing.

Stand with feet between hip and shoulder-width apart and hold the kettlebell by its horns, pulling the bottom of the bell into your lower sternum. Draw your shoulder blades together and down (“proud chest”) and cast your eyes on a spot on the floor approximately 15 feet in front of you.

Take a deep breath and root your feet. Then bend your hips back, imagining being able to touch your butt to the wall behind you. Keep a long spine with the tailbone tilted slightly up. When you feel a stretch in your hamstrings, extend your hips and squeeze your glutes, tucking your tailbone under as you lock out.

## 6. Kettlebell Goblet Half Get-Up



As with the swing, many kettlebell users like to skip ahead to more advanced moves than they're ready for.

Rather than jump in with a Turkish getup—an awesome but complex total-body movement—kettlebell newbies can start with the half getup, which still provides a tremendous core workout as well as flexibility training.

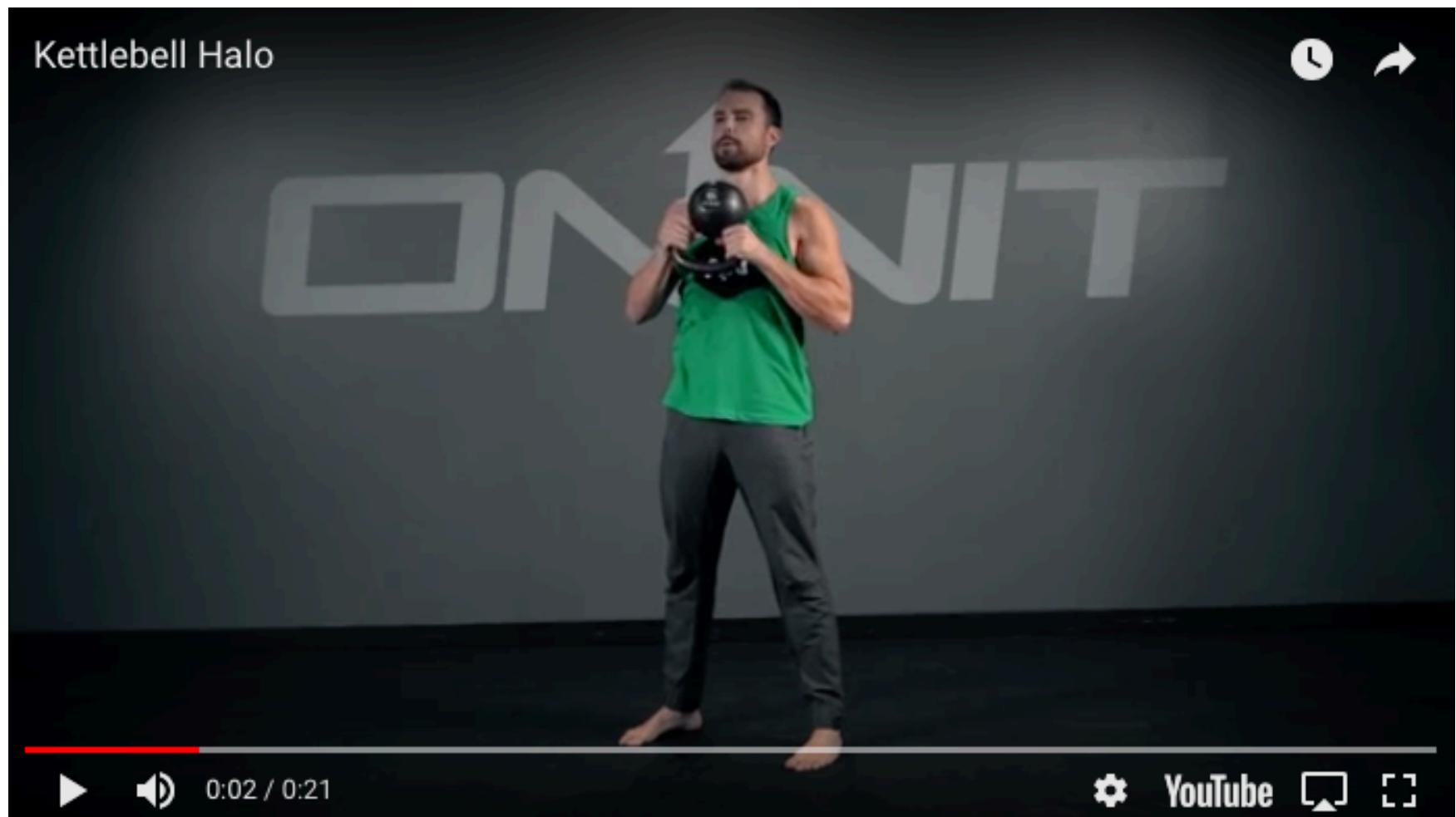
Lie down on your back on the floor, holding the kettlebell by the horns. Take a deep belly breath and brace your abs. Perform a situp and then tuck your right foot in toward your butt while you slide your left foot behind you so you form a “shin box” position on the floor.

Both knees should be bent about 90 degrees with feet facing opposite directions.

Extend your hips as if coming up to stand tall and then bring your left foot in front of you again and plant it on the floor with the knee bent 90 degrees. Turn your rear leg so the foot points straight behind you and you finish in a

lunge position. Reverse the entire motion to return to lying on the floor.

## 7. Kettlebell Halo



“Getting comfortable and aware of how to brace your body correctly when the kettlebell changes position is one of the most valuable things you can do,” says Wolf.

Moving the kettlebell in a circular motion around the body—called a “halo”—strengthens your core and prepares you for explosive exercises down the line.

It also exposes weaknesses and imbalances. “If you can’t hand the kettlebell off behind you,” says Wolf, “chances are you can’t wipe your ass either.”

To do the basic shoulder halo, stand with feet between hip and shoulder-width apart and hold the kettlebell by its horns upside down—the bell should face up. Screw your feet into the floor and draw your ribs down. Think “proud chest.”

Begin moving the kettlebell around your head, being careful to maintain your

posture and not bend your torso in any direction. Move slowly to avoid whacking yourself in the head. Make full circles and alternate directions.

Got these moves mastered?

## 3 Ways to Use Kettlebells



### 1. Warm Up With Them

If you're a longtime meathead who's now finding that years of bodybuilding-style workouts have led to muscle imbalances and injury, kettlebells can play a key role in restoring healthy movement patterns.

If you're not ready to commit to a kettlebell program outright, Heins recommends you at least start your workouts with kettlebell work to enhance mobility, which will allow you to get into the positions needed to perform your regular barbell lifts more safely. "That way, when you go under heavy load you can maintain technique."

The kettlebell, even though it's lighter than what you're used to, gives you enough feedback to challenge you and light up your nervous system. That way the communication between your brain and the rest of your body is clearer and more responsive to what you are asking of it."

Try doing goblet squats before barbell back squats, holding the bottom position for a few seconds to open up your hips. You can also do light one-arm overhead presses before military presses to get your shoulders warm. Chest-loaded swings are a great way to prepare the hips for barbell deadlifts.

## **2. Do a Full-Body Workout—Anytime, Anywhere**

All you need to do for a kick-ass workout that covers every major muscle group is “squat, hinge, push, and pull,” says Wolf. Cover those movement patterns and you’re good to go.

Pick from the exercises listed above for starters, or check out Wolf and Heins’ sample full-body beginner’s workout [HERE](#).

## **3. Set Up a Circuit**

Swings and getups get your heart rate up as well as any cardio machine, but do more to re-enforce good mechanics. And of course, they’re much more fun and challenging.

Try building a circuit with them or performing them on your downtime between weight-training sets.

For a sample kettlebell cardio workout, click [HERE](#).