# **How Do I know if I'm working "hard enough"?**

## **How to measure, track, and alter your intensity.**

Finding the right level of intensity can be a little tricky, particularly for the newer lifter. Again, we want to make sure we aren't taking it too easy, but on the other hand we don't want to be pushing so hard we can't sustain that level of output for any given rep range we are working in. Now, before we can talk about *"what is the right level of intensity"* Let's look at a couple of ways that we can **measure** and **track** our intensity. There are 3 important concepts and variables that you can utilize and manipulate to help you make sure you are working at the correct level of difficulty for sustainable growth.

### **Rate of Perceived Exertion (RPE)**

First, I want to share one of my favorite pieces of "Data" that I track along side my reps/set/weight, and that is **RPE (rate of perceived exertion)**. RPE is purely a subjective number you can assign to a particular workout or lift to measure how hard you feel you are working. The measurement is based upon several physical sensations that you have while working out, such as, your rate of breathing, your heart rate, how hot you feel, and simply how tired that last lift made you feel. The concept was invented by Swedish researcher **Gunnar Borg** in the 1960's and has gone through several re-inventions through the decades until it settled into the "1-10 scale" that we use today, and it looks like this:

| **The Modern RPE Scale** | | |
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| **10** | **Max Effort**- Your all out effort. Hard to maintain this level of difficulty for longer than 20-30 seconds. Leaving you unable to speak. Your first instinct is to lay down. | |
| **9** | **Very Hard Activity**- This is a level of intensity that is difficult to maintain for longer than 40 seconds of at a time. Leaving you unable to hold a conversation. You may look to take a knee or find a place to sit and regain your composure. | |
| **7-8** | **Vigorous Activity**- You are short of breathe, but can speak short 1-2 sentences at a time. You may want to sit down, but can stand if needed. | |
| **4-6** | **Moderate Activity**- Breathing becomes slightly more labored. You can maintain a short conversation. Still fairly comfortable, but you can tell you are working. | |
| **2-3** | **Light Activity**- Something you could easily maintain for hours if needed. | |
| **1** | **Very light Activity**- Almost nothing, but more than laying on the couch. | |

I love using RPE because it empowers the individual to assess what's happening in their own body, on that day, in real time. We are all vastly different, and have different backgrounds and different fitness levels. What might be a 8 for one person could be someone else's 4. With RPE you can make sure you are working at a level of difficulty that **matches your perspective**. I typically prefer using RPE over percentages of your 1RM (1 Rep max), because most people will rarely (if ever) actually test their one rep max of a given exercise, and I am of the belief that you shouldn't base your current workout on an all-out max attempt you did months ago, presumably on your best day. *Can using 1RM be useful, and do many programs use this measurement?* **Yes**. We just won't be using it in this program.

RPE may be subjective, but I prefer something that encourages the lifter to take inventory of how they are feeling on that specific day. If you have much experience exercising at higher levels of intensity you will know that somedays 'it just ain't there', and there are a lot of reasons why one day your workout can feel great, and the next day that same workout can feel impossibly hard. Things like your **sleep**, your **hydration + nutrition**, your **stress levels at work or home** can all play into your current level of readiness in the gym. RPE helps the lifter determine their own intensity, and as we learned previously about progressive overload, you need to systematically be working at higher and higher levels of intensity each and every workout in order to move forward.

While you can use RPE to help determine your level of intensity, using it alone could be considered less than optimal, due to the subjective nature the method. Simply put, listening to your body is a skill and it can take time to calibrate. Often times people can either under estimate their RPE or vastly over estimate it. Also, the further into your workout the more fatigue will start to set in, making an exercise start to feel more difficult than it otherwise would have if you were doing it at the start of your workout. The same thing can be said for the last set of an exercise compared to the first. So we will need a slightly more objective marker to base or RPE off of.

### **Reps in Reserve (RIR)**

So, let's talk about different metric that can help measure and determine our level of intensity, and that is the concept of **"Reps in Reserve" (RIR).** Reps in reserve is a fairly straight forward line of thinking, and it can look like this; The next time you are finishing a *"Working Set"* (The sets you do after your warm-up sets) I want you to ask yourself the question "If I absolutely **had to,** how many more reps could I have done at this weight, **with good form and control**?" If you answer "Probably 1 or 2 *good reps* left" **your RIR would be 2.** RIR and RPE are very similar in what they are trying to accomplish (Tracking intensity). They are somewhat interchangeable but when combined together they can help show you a more complete picture of how you are performing in the gym.

You can think of RIR and RPE as bummer rails that help guide you toward the correct level of intensity for **any** given rep range. If you are new to tracking your weights this may take a couple of workouts with some trial and error until you find the appropriate weights for your current fitness level. The good news is, all those reps still count, and they still hold value in your training.

| **RPE in correlation with RIR** | | |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **RPE** | **RIR** | **Level of intensity** |
| 10 | 0 | **Max Effort**- It took everything you had to lift that rep, without hurting yourself. |
| 9 | 1 | **Very intense**- If pushed, you MAYBE could get the weight up, but it would be difficult. |
| 8 | 2 | **Intense**- That was hard, but you are pretty confident you had at least 1, maybe 2 more good reps. |
| 7 | 3 | **Heavy**- You could easily do 2-3 more reps, but you could tell it was starting to get harder. |
| 6 | 4 | **Do-able**- "This was pretty easy." |
| 4-5 | 5-6 | **Warm-up Sets**- "Very easy, feels like practice." |
| 1-3 | 7-9 | **Very light**- "I could do this all day" |
| 0 | 10 | **Resting**- "I'm just looking at the weights." |

So, now that we have the metrics to which we can *measure* our intensity, let's answer the question of **"what level of intensity should I be working at?"** (Remember when I said this stuff was nuanced?). Typically speaking, you want the majority of your *"Working Sets"* to land somewhere in the **7-8 RPE** **(2-3 RIR)** with your last set of a particular movement around **8-9 RPE (1-2 RIR).** Notice how I didn't mention a 10 on the RPE scale or 0 RIR? Rarely will you ever need to go all the way to total failure. For the **majority of your sets** you should always be **saving 1-2 quality reps in the tank.**

The main reasoning behind this is almost entirely safety. As fatigue sets in and increases throughout the workout, the more room for error and instability there becomes. As you increase the risk of error and instability, you also increase the risk of injury. You will never truly be able to lower the risk of injury in the gym to zero, but there are plenty of ways to mitigate much of that risk by following a few 'best practices'. You want to always ensure that you can *safely* move and control the weight at the end of your set. **Your set isn't over until you safely put the weight down.**

You might find that your final set on most exercises will FEEL difficult and closer to a 9 RPE, which is fine, you just don't want **every single set** to feel that way. Working at the extremes of you capacity for every set just isn't necessary when it comes to getting stronger and can even hinder your progress. Remember we are looking for the **Minimum Effective Dose.**

RPE, or Rate of Perceived Exertion, is a subjective scale used to measure the intensity of your workout. It typically ranges from 1 to 10, with 1 being extremely light effort (like walking at a relaxed pace) and 10 being maximal effort (where you can’t perform another rep or sustain the activity). This scale helps you gauge how hard you’re working without relying on external devices like heart rate monitors or weight percentages. For example, an RPE of 8 would mean you’re working at an intensity where you could perform 2 more reps before failure.

If you’re familiar with RIR, or Reps In Reserve, you might notice how closely related it is to RPE. While RPE focuses on your perception of effort, RIR looks at how many reps you have left before you physically can’t do more. The two scales align perfectly: an RIR of 2 means you feel like you could perform 2 more reps, which would correspond to an RPE of 8. Both concepts allow you to track intensity in a flexible way, adapting to how your body feels on a given day. Whether you use RPE or RIR, the goal is to ensure you’re pushing yourself appropriately for your fitness level and workout goals.