



Grip Work for the Martial Artist

A strong grip is a great asset to any martial artist, I don't think anyone would argue with that. Grip strength is very handy for a grappler or mixed martial artist, but it's my opinion that even strikers can greatly benefit from a strong grip. The extra toughness that grip training can lend to one's hands and forearms is something everyone can benefit from. Some extra grip strength won't hurt the snap at the end of your punch either. We all know that being physically strong is no guarantee of punching hard but some people find that as they get physically stronger they can more easily relax. Relaxation is very much a key part of hitting hard.

Let's face it, even if you hate the idea of getting caught up grabbing, wrestling and grappling with someone, sooner or later it may happen whether you like it or not. It's better to have physical strength you never have to use than be missing it when you really need it.

With all that in mind, let's get started.

Types of Grip Strength:

There are two main types of grip strength and there is a multitude of ways to train them. The two main types are crushing strength and pinching strength.

Crushing Strength: Picture this, you have a can of soft drink in your hand and you start squeezing as hard as you can. Imagine you're trying burst can open. That's crushing strength. Holding onto an opponents wrist or ankle is where a martial artist will often have to apply this type of grip strength.

Pinching strength: This is more the idea of holding a really heavy paving brick in between your thumb and fingers while it hangs toward the ground. This exact type of gripping doesn't actually come up that much in the real world (unless perhaps you're paving) but it is still be very handy to work on. Working on your pinching strength adds a lot of strength to your thumbs and fingers. This is especially useful if you are grabbing for something that is not easily within reach, such when snapping at someone's gi/clothing or extremities.

You'll also find that there is three main ways of training for strength.

Concentric strength: This is the action of muscles shortening in length as they contract. Imagine you are holding a stress ball and crush it tight in your hand. That was a concentric contraction of your gripping muscles. You squeezed, they shortened.

Isometric Strength: If you now hold the ball in the crushed position your muscles are using isometric strength. This is because they are undergoing a contraction but not changing in length.

Eccentric Strength: Finally, if you slowly open your hand, resisting the stress balls force so that it doesn't just spring back to shape you have performed an eccentric muscle contraction. Your



muscles were undergoing a contraction to maintain control over the rebound properties of the ball yet they were lengthening during the contraction.

Isometric strength is extremely useful for the martial artist as more often than not we will apply our grip strength in a static manner. An example of this would be trying to keep hold of an object such as the handle of a weapon, a bunch of clothing or a clump of our attacker's hair. Notice that there is little to no resistance in actually clasping onto the aforementioned objects, the actual test of our grip comes in trying to keep hold of the object once we clasp onto it.

There are countless ways to improve grip strength and some are more useful to the martial artist than others. The exercises I've provided below are ones that I believe are very effective for martial artists and also easily accessible (even for those who train at home). Now that we've got all that covered, let's get into some exercises.



Group 1: Suspension Exercises.

This group includes grip exercises where you are suspending a weight above the ground. The weight may be a dumbbell, barbell, brick, sandbag or in the case of a timed hang, your own body.

I can't emphasize strongly enough how important safety is during suspension grip exercises. One of the greatest casualties of haphazard grip work are toes (yours and other peoples). Make sure that you are very safety conscious anytime you are performing grip work where you are suspending heavy amounts of weight. Never hang the weights over your or other peoples feet.. Securely attach the towels/devices to the weights where appropriate. Perform the exercise in a place where you are not going to have people walking close by you. Performing the exercises on a soft surface like grass is great because you won't damage the weights if you drop them.

1.) Towel Grip Dumbbell Curl: This is simply a modification of the dumbbell curl action. Grab a towel and loop it SECURELY around the dumbbell. Perform the curls as usual while gripping the two ends of the towel in each hand. This is a great way to train your isometric crushing strength while working an exercise which many people are already doing anyway. As a bonus you'll also find a much higher level of involvement of the total arm musculature, yes bigger biceps may be a bonus of this movement.

If training at home you could use towels attached to bricks for resistance.

Sets, Reps & Rest Breaks: Just follow your normal format for dumbbell curls. Otherwise 2 sets of 5 reps with a 3 to 5 minute rest between sets can be a simple yet effective scheme for strength. Use the same weight for both sets and then increase the weight by half a kilo whenever you achieve the 2 sets of 5 with perfect technique.

2.a) Towel Grip Farmers Walk: The conventional farmers walk is a great exercise where you hold a pair of heavy objects (one in each hand) and then walk with the aim of achieving a predetermined distance or time. The towel grip farmers walk is a tweak on this exercise which makes it possible to get a great deal of grip work with a lighter weight than you would need to use when performing the conventional farmers walk. This is great because many commercial gyms don't stock very heavy dumbbells, this means that the conventional farmers walk can be way too easy to even bother with. Regardless whether performed with the towel or in conventional style the farmers walk is a great isometric crushing exercise.

If training at home you could use towels attached to bricks or sandbags for resistance.

2.b.) Plate Pinch Farmers Walk: This is a conventional farmer's walk performed while pinch gripping two weight plates in each hand. Grab four weight plates of matching weights. Put each pair together so that the smooth side is facing outwards, this makes it much more challenging.



Hold a pair of plates in each hand and walk around (or stand still if you choose to) and time how long you can hold them for. This is a great isometric exercise for pinching strength.

If training at home you could substitute the weight plates for heavy pavers or wood. You could even make up a specialist pinch gripping tool from a thick piece of wood (that's what you'll pinch) with a rope attached to it from which you can hang bricks for resistance. A strong piece of cloth (canvas or an old gi) from which you can hang bricks for resistance is also terrific and is even more specific to martial arts grip strength than the weight plates or wood. Just watch that the bricks don't smash your shins up too badly from banging against them as you walk.

Sets, Reps & Rest Breaks: A 90 second hold is a pretty good time frame to work on as it brings about a good mix of strength and endurance. Performing a ninety second hold for each version of the farmers walk once a week will bring about good gains without eating up too much time or recovery ability.

3.) Static Barbell Hold: Easy to set up and safe for your feet. Grab a barbell and set it up in the power rack on the safety bars at a height that makes you have to slightly bend down to pick it up. Bend down, pick up the barbell, hold onto it for 90 seconds, and then put it back down. When you can complete the 90 second hold, increase the weight. Although this exercise is good for isometric crushing strength it has one major limitation. Gains in isometric strength are quite specific to the position at which the contraction is performed. There are some exceptions but they don't usually come up in grip training. This means that squeezing a skinny barbell will make your grip strong for squeezing a skinny barbell. I don't know about you but I've never had a fight with a barbell. In my mind it stands to reason that our grip training should attempt to replicate the conditions that we want a strong grip for.

If you want to have a vice like grip on a competitors gi then perform the static barbell hold by attaching some strong material to a weight and hold onto the material instead of gripping a barbell.

If you want to be strength for holding onto a person's wrist or ankle then perform the hold with a barbell about as thick as a persons wrist or ankle. This can be achieved either by using specialist thick bars or simply wrapping a thick towel numerous times around the barbell prior to gripping it.

Sets, Reps & Rest Breaks: A 90 second hold is a pretty good time frame to work on as it brings about a good mix of strength and endurance. Performing a ninety second hold once a week will bring about good gains.

4.) 1 Arm Dumbbell Rows With Cloth: A standard 1 arm dumbbell row but performed by gripping a piece of strong cloth which has been securely attached to the dumbbell.

Sets, Reps & Rest Breaks: Just follow your normal format for dumbbell curls. Otherwise 2 set of 5 reps with a 3 to 5 minute rest between sets can be an effective scheme for strength. Use the same weight for both sets and then increase the weight by half a kilo whenever you achieve the 2 sets of 5 with perfect technique.

5.) Eagle Claw Dumbbell Hold: This is not some exotic move from the kung fu style. It's just a descriptive name for a good exercise. Most of the time we use our grip strength our hands are pretty much closed, as in the case of grabbing a gi or someone's hair or fingers. The thing is though; it's good to have some strength when your hand is opened up as in an eagle claw/talon like position. If you are ripping and tearing while trying to get a hold of something then this kind of open hand strength is very useful. It's also pretty easy to develop with the following exercise.

Grab a dumbbell and hold it end on in with an eagle claw type of grip as shown in figure ????. All you need to do is hold the dumbbell for 90 seconds while either standing still or performing a farmer's walk. Easy huh? When you achieve the goal of the 90 second hold then increase the weight by hanging a weight from the dumbbell with some rope. Don't try to increase the resistance by going to ever increasingly bigger dumbbells to grip onto as they poundage progressions are too big for this type of exercise.

I recommend performing this movement just once each week as it can be pretty hard on the hands and fingers. If you get any irritation in your fingers or hands from going hard on this movement then either back off or leave it out for a while. There's no point wrecking your hands in the pursuit of strengthening them.

Although this exercise will build what I refer to as claw strength, it may also improve your crushing and pinching by increasing the overall strength of your fingers and thumbs.

Group 2. Crushing, Squeezing and Tearing Exercises.

1.) Newspaper Balls: Grab a newspaper, preferably one that everyone in the house is done reading. Take each sheet and crush it up into the smallest, tightest little ball you can. Repeat this until you've destroyed the whole paper and then thoughtfully toss it in the recycling. Experiment with crushing up two or more pages at a time.

Every second day is a good frequency for this exercise.

2.) Newspaper Tear: I got this exercise from the writings of old time strength author John McCallum. He recommends it as a great build up exercise to tearing a deck of cards. Grab a newspaper. Take two sheets of paper, lay them evenly on top of each other and then fold them in halves five times. Tear it in halves and even aim for quarters if you can. Keep doing this until you get right through the whole paper. Once again, be sure no one wanted to read that paper.

Every second day is a good frequency for this exercise. Both the newspaper tear and the newspaper balls can be easily performed while sitting around watching television, just to turn the volume right up to hear over all that scrunching and tearing.

3.) Finger Extension in Rice Bucket: I think this is one of the most important exercises anyone can do. The flexors of our fingers are worked in almost every action we do and yet our extensors of the fingers barely ever get any work at all. I have found this exercise to be a huge asset in the health of my fingers and regular performance of this exercise helps keep away the cracks, crunches, clicks and pops I have accrued over the years.

Grab a big bucket or pot and fill it with rice. I bought a nice looking plant pot as the aesthetic appeal of an old bucket in the lounge room corner soon wore off. Make sure the pot is wide enough to allow you to fully open up your hand inside it and deep enough to allow you to immerse your arm up to a few inches above your wrist. You can buy huge, cheap bags of rice from most grocery stores. Some folks have mentioned using sand but I feel that rice works better and makes less mess around the house.

Put your thumbs and fingers together to make a duck beak kind of shape (fig.1.). Leading with the tip of the beak, push your fingers down into the rice. You may have to make a drilling motion to get your hand deep enough. Once your hand is deep into the rice, use a forceful action to open up your fingers as far apart as possible. Pull your hand out and repeat. Aim to perform twenty repetitions every day. Your hands and fingers will thank you for it. You will need to experiment with the depth that you immerse your hand in the bucket as the deeper you go, the greater the resistance will be. When you can complete twenty good repetitions then increase the depth for that hand.



Putting It All Together

It is not necessary to perform all of these movements all the time in order to get a strong grip. Here is an effective sample program to follow that will bring about great gains in strength without eating up lots of your time and recovery ability.

Monday:

- 1.) Towel Grip Farmers Walk: 1x90 second hold.
- 2.) Static Barbell Hold: 1x90 second hold.

Friday:

- 1.) Plate Pinch Farmers Walk: 1x90 second hold.
- 2.) Eagle Claw Dumbbell Hold: 1x90 second hold.

Everyday:

- 1.) Finger Extension in Rice Bucket: 20 repetitions everyday for each hand.

You will pretty much gain all the grip strength you will ever need simply from following the five exercises that were prescribed above. Strive to increase the resistance you use but be sure to give yourself two sessions with the same weight for each exercise. This will ensure better long term progress.

How would you fit in the grip work of Monday and Friday's sessions without adding extra time to an already tight training schedule? Easy, the 90 seconds worth of time spent on each movement can be slotted in between sets of abdominal and or calf work. Squeezing (no pun intended) the grip training in between sets of abdominal/calf exercises works very well as it is time efficient yet won't compromise the training effect of either the grip, abdominal or calf exercises. This is because the exercises for the body parts involved share no significant overlap. The end result is that fatigue from exercising your grip will have little to no detrimental effect on your abs, your ab exercise won't hamper your calf training and your calf or ab training will not hurt your grip work. If only all things in life came together so sweetly huh?

For any of you bodyweight conditioning fans out there you could easily incorporate the Farmer's Walk (and it's variations) and the Eagle Claw Dumbbell Hold into your high rep leg work. Hindu Squats while performing the Eagle Claw Dumbbell Hold would work very well, just drop the dumbbells when you hit the ninety second mark. Remember if you manage to perform the hold for ninety seconds then an increase in weight will soon be on the horizon for you! Incorporating Plate Pinches with lunges, wall sits and or step ups works well too. For safety reasons the Static Barbell Hold is best left as an exercise all of it's own, this is because the weight used in this exercise will often be very, very heavy.



Other exercises where you can get a two in one training effect are things such as Thick Bar Pull/Chin Ups and Towel Grip Triceps Pushdowns. Thick Bar Deadlifts, Thick Bar Biceps Curls, Thick Bar Reverse Barbell Curls and Thick Bar Reverse Wrist Curls can all very effective exercises.

The key thing to remember when combining grip work with another exercise is “am I bastardizing two good exercises to make one dodgy exercise”?

The following newspaper exercises are optional. I have listed them for those of you who are extremely focused on achieving your full grip strength potential. They are the icing on the cake.

Night time, Monday, Wednesday and Friday

1.) Newspaper Balls:

Night time, Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday:

1.) Newspaper Tear:

Conclusion

The list of exercises I have provided in this article form only the tip of the iceberg. There are many more exercise options for creating a strong grip. I used to train with a group of friends at a campus where we all studied. We come up with different challenges for each other ranging from the heaviest two fingered deadlift to the most two finger chins (two fingers means one finger from each hand, not two from each). Other times we'd just pinch grip a twenty kilo plate in each hand and see who could walk the furthest before they dropped. Experiment, see what feels right for you. A few healthy competitions amongst training buddies can be a great way to spur each other on towards a powerful grip.