

By Matt Jones

# Killer Grip

Grip-strength exercises for martial artists.

A strong grip is a great asset to any martial artist, whether they be a grappler or striker. Strength and conditioning coach and martial artist Matt Jones shows you how to achieve it.



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**T**he 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. Let's face it, even if you hate the idea of getting caught up grabbing, wrestling and grappling with someone, it can often happen whether you like it or not. It's better to have physical strength you may never use than be missing it when you really need it. With that in mind, let's get started.

### Types of Grip-strength

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

**Crushing Strength:** Picture holding a can of soft drink and you squeezing it as hard as you can, trying to burst it open. That's crushing strength. Holding onto an opponent's wrist or ankle is where this type of strength will be of most use to a martial artist.

**Pinching strength:** The strength required to hold a heavy paving brick between your thumb and fingers while it hangs toward the ground. This type of gripping doesn't actually come up that much in the real world (unless you're paving), but working on your pinching ability still adds a lot of strength to your thumbs and fingers. This is especially useful if you are grabbing for something that's not easily within reach, such as when snapping at an opponent's gi/clothing or extremities.

There are three main ways of training for strength.

**Concentric strength:** This is the action of muscles shortening in length as they contract. Crushing a stress ball tightly in your hand involves a concentric contraction of your gripping muscles — you squeeze, they shorten.

**Isometric Strength:** If you hold the ball in the crushed position, your muscles are using isometric strength, because they are undergoing a contraction but not changing in length. Isometric strength is extremely useful for the martial artist, as we will often apply our grip strength in a static manner. An example of this would be trying to keep hold of the handle of a weapon, a bunch of clothing or a clump of an attacker's hair.

**Eccentric Strength:** If you slowly open your hand, resisting the stress ball's force so that it doesn't just spring back to shape, you are performing an eccentric muscle contraction. Your muscles were undergoing a contraction to maintain control over the rebound properties of the ball, yet they were lengthening.

The exercises below are particularly useful for those who engage in throws, holds and restraints, and also work on clenching and opening the fist as required for striking.

### Group 1: Suspension Exercises.

These involve 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. One of the greatest casualties of haphazard grip work are toes, so safety is important during suspension grip exercises. Never hang weights over your feet, and securely attach the towels/devices to the weights where appropriate.

**1. Towel-Grip Dumbbell Curl:** Loop a towel securely around a 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 performing your regular weights routine. This modification also gives a much higher level of involvement of the total arm musculature, and thus a better workout. If training at home you could use towels attached to bricks.

**Sets, Reps & Rest:** Follow your normal format for dumbbell curls. Otherwise, try two sets of five reps with a three-to-five minute rest in between. Use the same weight for both sets and increase it by half a kilo when you can achieve two sets with perfect technique.



Dumbbell curl using a gi belt.

**2.a. Towel-Grip Farmer's Walk:** For the conventional farmer's walk, you hold a pair of heavy objects (one in each hand) and walk with them for a predetermined distance or time. The towel-grip farmer's walk makes it possible to get a great deal of grip work with a lighter weight. As many commercial gyms don't stock very heavy dumbbells, the conventional farmer's walk can be too easy to even bother with. Whether performed with the towel or in conventional style, the farmer's walk is a great isometric crushing exercise. If training at home you could use towels attached to bricks, or sandbags.

**2.b. Plate-Pinch Farmers Walk:** Grab four plates of matching weight and put each pair together so the smooth sides face outwards (this makes it more challenging). Pinch-grip 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 weights for heavy pavers or wood. You could even make up a specialist pinch-gripping tool from a thick piece of wood (which you'll pinch) with a rope attached from which to hang bricks for resistance. A strong piece of cloth (canvas or an old gi) from which you can hang bricks is even more specific to martial arts grip-strength.

**Sets, Reps & Rest:** A 90-second hold is good for a mix of strength and endurance. Performing a 90-second hold for each version of the farmer's walk once a week will



Plate-pinch farmer's walk.





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. Put a barbell in the power rack on the safety bars at a height such that you have to slightly bend down to pick it up. Pick it up, 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, gains in isometric strength are generally quite specific to the position at which the contraction is performed. This means that squeezing a skinny barbell will make your grip strong for

squeezing a skinny barbell.

Our grip-training should attempt to replicate the conditions in which we'll use that strength, so if you want a vice-like grip on competitors' gis, then perform the exercise by attaching some strong material to a weight instead. If you want strength for holding onto a person's wrist or ankle, then use a barbell of similar thickness. Use a specialist thick bar, or simply wrap a thick towel numerous times around the barbell prior to gripping it.

**Sets, Reps & Rest:** As for farmer's walk.

**4. One-Arm Dumbbell Rows with Cloth:** A standard 1 arm dumbbell row but performed



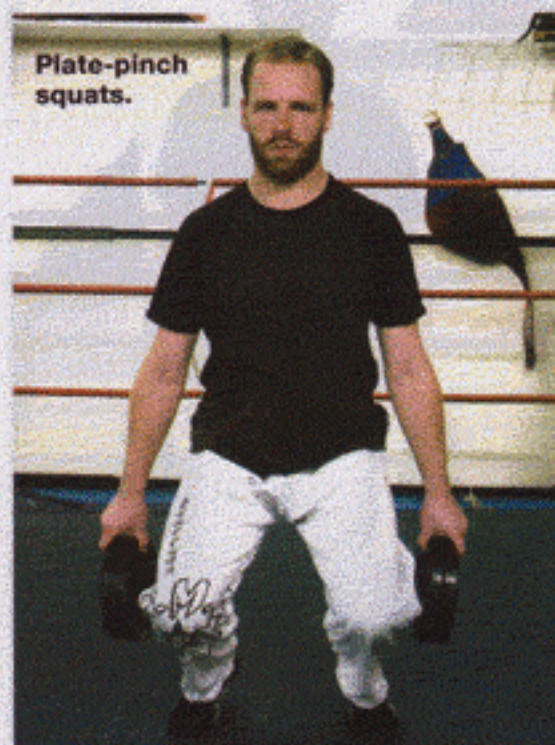
by gripping a piece of strong cloth which has been securely attached to the dumbbell.

**Sets, Reps & Rest:** 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:** Mostly we use our grip strength with our hands almost closed, as when grabbing a gi or someone's hair or fingers. However, it's good to have some strength when your hand is open, in a talon-like position, for ripping and tearing or while trying to get a better hold.

Grab a dumbbell end-on in with an eagle claw-style grip. Hold it for 90 seconds while either standing still or doing a farmer's walk. When you can complete a 90-second hold, hang another weight from the dumbbell with some rope. Don't increase the resistance by going to bigger dumbbells, as the poundage progressions in most gyms are too great for this exercise. This exercise can also improve your crushing and pinching by increasing the overall strength of your fingers and thumbs.

**Sets, Reps & Rest:** I recommend performing this movement just once a week as it can be hard on the hands and fingers. If you get any irritation in your fingers or hands, either back off or leave it out for a while. There's no point wrecking your hands in the pursuit of strengthening them.





## Killer Grip Strength

### Group 2. Crushing, Squeezing and Tearing Exercises.

**1. Newspaper Balls:** Take each sheet of a newspaper 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:** This exercise comes from the writings of old-time strength author John McCallum, who recommends it as a great build-up to tearing a deck of cards. Take two sheets of newspaper, lay them 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. Every second day is a good frequency for this exercise. These exercises can be done while watching TV.

**3. Finger Extension in Rice Bucket:** Our fingers' flexors are worked all the time, but the extensors barely get worked at all. Regular performance of this exercise helps reduce cracking and popping in the fingers.

Newspaper tear.



Newspaper balls.



Fill a bucket or pot with rice. Make sure the pot is wide enough that you can 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.

Put your thumbs and fingers together to make a duck's bill shape and push your fingers down into the rice. You may have to use a drilling motion to get your hand in deep enough. Once it's in, use a forceful action to open up your fingers as far apart as possible. Pull your hand out and repeat. Do 20 repetitions daily — your hands and fingers will thank you for it. Experiment with the depth you immerse your hand in the bucket, as the deeper you go, the greater the resistance. Once you can complete 20 strong repetitions, increase the depth.

### Putting It All Together

It's not necessary to perform all these movements all the time to get a strong grip. Here is an effective sample program to follow that will bring about great gains in strength without eating up 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.

#### Every day:

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

• Optional exercises for those extremely focused on achieving their full grip-strength potential:

Night time, Monday, Wednesday and Friday:

1.) Newspaper Balls:

Night time, Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday:

1.) Newspaper Tear:

Strive to increase the level of resistance, but complete at least two sessions with the same weight for each exercise to ensure better long term progress. To save time, these exercises can be slotted in between sets of abdominal or calf work, etc., as there is little or no overlap in the muscles used.

Bodyweight conditioning fans out there can easily incorporate the farmer's walk (and its variations) and the eagle-claw dumbbell-hold into your high-rep leg work. Hindu squats while performing the eagle-claw dumbbell-hold could work well, just drop the

Four-finger chin-ups – try a few!



dumbbells after 90-seconds. Remember, if you can perform the hold for 90 seconds, a weight-increase is nigh. Incorporating plate-pinches with lunges, wall-sits and/or step ups works well too. For safety reasons, the static barbell-hold is best done on its own, as the weight used will often be very heavy.

Other exercises that have a two-in-one training effect include chin-ups on a thick bar and towel-grip triceps push-downs. Deadlifts, biceps curls, reverse barbell curls and reverse wrist curls all done with a thicker bar are also effective options. The key thing to ask yourself when combining grip work with another exercise is, am I bastardising two good exercises to make one dodgy exercise?

### Conclusion

The list of exercises described here are 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 and we'd come up with different challenges, ranging from the heaviest two-fingered deadlift to the most two-finger chin-ups (meaning one finger from each hand). Sometimes we'd just pinch-grip a 20-kilo plate in each hand and see who could walk the furthest before they dropped. Some healthy competition between training buddies can be a great way to spur each other on towards a powerful grip.

Matt Jones is a nationally accredited personal trainer, strength and conditioning coach, Pilates instructor and masseuse. Founder of ISO Health's Exercise and Natural Therapies Clinic, Matt has a decade of experience in the health and fitness industry and his list of past and present clients includes numerous international athletes, Olympic, Commonwealth and World Championship medalists. Matt has also rehabilitated himself from a broken neck and other serious spinal injuries. **BLITZ**