

Barbell Rows

Most people associate rows with machines that place you in a position to do them. The most valuable rowing exercise is the one that makes you assume the position and maintain it throughout the set. This way, you get the benefit of moving the bar through the whole range of motion, and the stability work involved in holding your back in the right position to do it. As with all beneficial barbell training, the more work you have to do during the exercise, the better the exercise.

Barbell rows start on the floor and end on the floor, each and every rep. The bar does not hang from the arms between reps. Each rep is separated by a breath and a reset of the lower back. Starting from the floor enables the hamstrings and glutes to help get the bar moving, so that the lats and scapula retractors can finish a heavier weight than they could from a dead hang in the arms. Done this way, the exercise works not only the lats, upper back, and arms – the muscles typically associated with rowing – but the low back and hip extensors as well.

When rowing from the floor, the most critical factor in technique is the position of the lower back. The lumbar spine must be held in extension, just like it is in a deadlift and for exactly the same reason. A major difference between rows and deadlifts is the fact that the back angle changes as the bar comes off the floor; the knees are already extended and are not really involved much, so the hip extensors contribute to the initial pull from the floor by raising the chest through the locked back, transmitting this force to the bar. The finish occurs as the elbows bend and slam the bar into the lower ribcage area. The bar will leave the floor from a position directly below the scapulas, just like a deadlift; unlike a deadlift, the back angle will never become vertical, and in fact will not rise much higher than where it is just after the bar leaves the floor, just above horizontal at the shoulders.

Approach the bar with a deadlift stance, maybe not quite as close; light weights can be pulled through the air to the belly over a curved bar path as you warm up, but as the weight gets heavier standard pulling mechanics will prevail and the bar will operate vertically over the mid-foot as in all heavy pulling exercises. As weight is added, the bar will adjust itself to the correct position over the foot whether you want it to or not. The grip can vary quite a bit, but about the same as the bench press width is perhaps the best place to start. A hook grip is useful at heavier weights, or straps can be used. Eyes should be fixed on the floor in front of your position a few feet, not looking straight down but also not attempting to look straight forward, which would place the neck in too extended a position.

From the correct stance, take the grip on the bar, take a big breath, raise it from the floor with straight elbows to get it moving, and continue it on up by bending the elbows and slamming the bar into the upper part of the belly. This movement leads with the elbows, and you should think about slamming the elbows into the ceiling. The most important part of the technique of the barbell row is the back position while the bar movement takes place: the spine must be locked into extension, with the chest up and the lower back arched the whole time the bar is moving. After the bar contacts the belly, it is lowered back to the floor, the air is exhaled and a new breath taken, and the back is reset before each rep. Don't attempt to hold it against the belly at the top or lower it too slowly; the barbell row is like the deadlift in that the work is intended to be mainly concentric. Since heavier weights will essentially be dropped, bumper plates are good to use for rowing, or use rubber mats under your standard iron plates.