

There are several popular and effective bench press assistance exercises that can be of use to the powerlifter. Among them are incline and decline presses as well as variations of the regular flat bench. They each have different benefits and each have their own challenges. To get the most out of these exercises, I'd like to describe

how to best execute each one as well as common ways lifters perform them to their detriment. In addition, I will explore some alternatives.

Incline presses are an extremely popular exercise for bodybuilders. Inclines target the upper portion of the pectoral muscles. However, many powerlifters do not perform inclines in the most effective manner. To start, if the angle of the incline exceeds 30 degrees, most of the work is done by the delts, not by the chest. Another practice that lessens the effectiveness of inclines is while pressing, many lifters lift their butts off the bench. This essentially changes the incline press to an almost flat press. This totally defeats the purpose of the exercise by taking away emphasis on the targeted area; the upper pec. For best results, keep your butt on the bench, with your back flat on the inclined bench support. You may have to lower the weight to achieve this proper form. If you do want to target your delts, then use an angle over 30 degrees.

The decline press is another popular exercise. Its focus is just the opposite of inclines; placing strong emphasis on the lower pec region. When many lifters perform declines they tend to hit the bar closer to the waist than the chest, essentially doing a press off their stomachs. This shortens the range of motion drastically. This could explain why some lifters claim to decline press more than they can on the regular flat bench. Less distance the bar must move translates to more weight that can be lifted; Physics 101. For best results when doing declines, lower the bar to the lower pec area and press upwards. As with inclines, you may have to lower the weight used.

A major complication for many lifters who want to work their upper and lower pecs, is they don't have access to an incline or decline bench; but no problem! For the upper pecs, try benching on a flat bench with a wide grip lowering the bar to a point high on the chest, towards the head. Emphasis on the pecs can be increased by keeping your elbows at right angles to the body. This variation of the bench really stresses the upper pecs and is actually more effective than inclines. Be careful and patient when starting to use this exercise. If you use heavy weights too quickly, you can easily pull a muscle. Start with lighter weights and warm-up and stretch slowly with this movement. This extended stretching of the pecs and shoulders is a drawback to this exercise. If you experience any pain or soreness, don't go as high towards your neck as you were, decrease the weight or drop the exercise altogether. Start with about 2/3's of your regular flat bench weight and go from there.

To target the lower pec area, try the opposite of the above example. Hit the bar lower on the chest, slightly below your nipple line. As in the previous example, keep your elbows at right angles to the body and you will also add more emphasis to your pecs. However, the regular flat bench works the lower pecs pretty hard already, so I really don't see much need for this exercise.

Fitting these assistance exercises into your routine is the last topic. Inclines can be a good choice on your light bench day, replacing regular flat benches or after your benches. If you don't have access to an incline bench, benches high to the chest can be substituted. The same can be said for declines and their substitute exercise. Discontinue most, if not all, assistance work for the bench like inclines, declines and these bench variations the last 2-3 weeks prior a meet. Dumbbells can be used for inclines and declines instead of a barbell for variety and additional work for the stabilizing musculature.

Inclines and declines are two of several bench assistance exercises available to the powerlifter. You can also get most, if not more, benefit from the flat bench variations I discussed in this article. This is espe-

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## INCLINES & DECLINES

as told to PL USA by Doug Daniels

cially valuable if you do not have an incline or decline bench. Full range of movement is essential for best results in any exercise. On the other hand, extreme range of movement can be risking injury. Work into any new exercise slowly with lighter weights. Never compromise your lifting form to increase the weight. Don't cheat yourself

from their potential benefits just to be able to lift more. As with any assistance exercise, remember their end goal is to increase the powerlifts. Use the most effective exercises in the most effective manner and your lifting totals will be on a steady incline.