

SQUATS VERSUS LUNGES, WHICH IS BETTER?

By Aris Akavan, ACE CPT, BS MIS

Regular leg training is very important to build muscle mass, to increase endurance and for strength, and any personal trainer will agree that two essential leg exercises are the squat and the lunge. Both offer tremendous benefits to the body including muscle development in the gluteus (buttocks), quadriceps (front of thighs), calves, and hamstrings (back of thighs). Moreover, both are functional movements that we perform daily when walking, going up the stairs, or standing up from sitting. Therefore, including them as part of your workout routine will help keep joints healthy and prevent injury by strengthening the hip muscles and the core; a strong core will improve balance and reduce stress on the knees and back. Between squats and lunges, one exercise is not better than the other, but one may be better suited to specific fitness goals.

Muscles Used

The squat is the foundation of sitting and lifting heavy objects off the floor, while the lunge is the basis of all walking and running patterns. Even though both work similar muscle groups, there are differences in the muscles they target and movement. For example even though both exercises engage the buttocks, each targets different buttock muscles which, from biggest to smallest, are the gluteus maximus, the gluteus medius and the gluteus minimus; Moreover when it comes to movement, squatting has a more stable base due to having both feet firmly planted on the ground while the stepping forward action of the lunge makes the base of support less stable, testing balance.

Squats primarily target the quadriceps to flex the thigh and straighten the knees, the hamstrings to extend the leg and the gluteus maximus. Secondary muscles used are the calves which support the raising and lowering into a squat and the lower back to support the torso (chest and abdomen). The muscles used in the lunge are the same as those utilized in the squat, however, because of the greater range of motion and requiring greater stabilization on one leg, a lunge activates more the hamstring and the gluteus medius. On the other hand, side lunges place more emphasis on the adductor (inner thighs) and abductor (outer thighs) muscles. Moreover, small changes in form for both exercises activate different muscles. For example, leaning forward in a lunge works more the gluteus and hamstrings while an upright body works more the quadriceps. Squatting to parallel uses mostly quadriceps while going lower, or taking a wider stance, activates more gluteus and hamstrings.

Proper Form and Variations

For a squat start with legs slightly wider than hips, feet pointing forward and arms out in front of the chest to help with balance. Hinge back at the hips and lower into a squat keeping the spine neutral. Keep the weight in the heels and knees behind the toes. It is fine to lift the toes but not the heels, as toes lifted keep the pressure on the quadriceps, while heels lifted push the knees past the toes and put unnecessary pressure on the knees. Hold for 2-3 seconds and push back to standing position by driving through the heels. To help with proper form, beginners can start with a stability ball placed between

the lower back and the wall. For a lunge start standing with feet together and step forward or backward with one leg. Take a long step to prevent the front knee from going past the toe. Lower your hips until both knees are bent at about a 90-degree angle. Front knee is over the ankle, back knee is close to the floor but not touching it, and back heel is lifted. Drive through the front foot to return to starting position as the back leg only functions as support. Beginners can start holding onto something and the movement is up and down instead of forward and back.

Once you can perform the squat and the lunge with good form, try adding dumbbells or a barbell to quickly increase strength and test balance. A couple of variations for the lunges are walking lunges or with the back leg elevated on a bench, while a couple of variations for the squat are squat to calf raises (lift heels as you come up) or squat front kick (kick as you come up). Turn either into a quick cardio workout by adding jumps (jump up with the squat or jump and switch legs with the lunge) or challenge the core and balance by placing one leg on an unstable surface like the BOSU ball.

So Which One is Better?

Since all major muscles in the lower body should be strength trained at least two times per week, both squats and lunges should be included in your workout routine. Both are the foundation of everyday movement and, even though they work similar muscle groups, they target different muscles to tone the legs and shape the butt; Include both for a healthy, strong, and fit body. The key is to master proper form to increase the benefits of the exercise while preventing injury.

About the Author

Aris Akavan, ACE certified Personal Trainer & Health Coach, is owner of Body Fitness by Aris. Her mission is to assist others in leading a healthier lifestyle by balancing exercise and proper eating habits to achieve the ultimate body & mind wellness. Aris leads by example as she practices what she preaches. She leads an alcohol free and smoke free lifestyle and has worked out while following proper nutrition practices for over 15 years. Visit Aris at <http://www.BodyFitnessByAris.com> or join her on www.Facebook.com/BodyFitnessByAris