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ACHES & CLAIMS

Getting a Handle On Weight Training

By **LAURA JOHANNES**

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They look like cannonballs with handles. Some fitness experts say these weight-training tools, called kettlebells, create a unique, full-body workout, but other experts fear the explosive movements usually involved with the equipment could cause injury.

Kettlebells, used by weightlifters in the early 20th century, are becoming popular again. That's largely due to former Russian military instructor Pavel Tsatsouline, who teamed up in 2001 with fitness publisher Dragon Door Publications Inc., of Little Canada, Minn., to start selling kettlebells in the U.S. A number of companies now sell the bells, which have a rough cast-iron surface.

In general, men start with a 35-pound bell and women start with 18 or 26 pounds, depending on their strength. Dragon Door says women are 40% of its customers and about 80% of those attending classes taught by instructors certified in its methods.

You can use a kettlebell to do traditional lifting exercises, but the routines popularized by Mr. Tsatsouline use the full body rather than a single muscle. A signature exercise is the kettlebell swing, in which you grab the bell with both hands and swing it from between your legs until it is about shoulder height. Many instructors suggest lifting them outside, says Nashville, Tenn., instructor David Whitely, in part because if you drop one no harm is done.

The health benefits of strength training are well-established. However, so far, few studies compare traditional free weights or machines to kettlebells. In one study, presented at the 2006 meeting of the nonprofit National Strength and Conditioning Association, researchers from Georgetown College in Kentucky found a 35-pound kettlebell worked muscles harder -- as

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measured by electrical activity -- than a dumbbell of the same weight. The reason is that the bell's offset center of gravity makes the load less stable, increasing difficulty, says researcher Chris Proulx, now at Keene State College, in Keene, N.H. But a higher-weight dumbbell would likely work the muscles just as hard, he adds.

Some fitness experts have concerns about safety, particularly about the swing, which some fear could injure the back. "I wouldn't take [someone] who has not been exercising and start her on a kettlebell program -- it's too risky," says Manhattan personal trainer Joan Pagano, author of several strength-training books for women. She has concerns that many of the exercises put too much wear-and-tear on joints.

Kettlebell enthusiasts say the handle facilitates exercises that could be awkward with a dumbbell, and its off-center weight distribution creates a unique workout. They also say the bells strengthen shoulders and back, and actually prevent injuries.

Mr. Tsatsouline says kettlebells are very unlikely to cause injury if you work up to the exercises gradually and take the time to learn proper form. For example, the thrust in the swing should come from the hips, not the back. He adds that kettlebells provide enough variety on their own, but that some people do prefer to use them along with traditional free weights.

Write to Laura Johannes at laura.johannes@wsj.com

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