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Should Women Squat if They Don't Want Big Legs?

By: Bret Contreras

Short Answer: Yes, as long as there are no orthopedic conditions that would preclude doing them. The squat is *THE* primary foundational movement in strength training and it will assist the vast majority of women in achieving their health, strength, and physique goals. The long answer is going to take me some time to fully explain, especially considering my tendency to go off on tangents, so bear with me.

One of my most popular articles on the site is [Growing the Glutes Without Growing the Legs](#). In fact, my friend [Nathalia Melo](#) (former Ms. Bikini Olympia) recently shared it on her Facebook page and the article experienced a resurgence. In the article, I emphasized the fact that when most women finally attain the level of leanness that they desire, they end up being very happy with the shape of their legs even if they squat frequently. Nevertheless, far too many women feel that they shouldn't squat because their legs are already too big for their liking and they do not want them growing any larger. In the article, I detailed a plan for targeting the glutes without hitting much quad and hammies. There are indeed some women who should stick to the strategy outlined in the article. However, unfortunately, many women are missing out by failing to perform their squats due to their incomplete understanding of the adaptational physiology involved in squatting when combined with proper dieting.

You Can't Have Your Cake and Eat it Too

You simply cannot have your cake and eat it too. More accurately, you can't have your cake and have lean legs. Well, actually you can if you adhere to flexible dieting and consistently fit your macros while sticking to mostly whole, unprocessed foods while sprinkling in some treats in small amounts, but that's besides the point. What I'm trying to convey is that many women covet either the super model look or the fitness model look. Neither of these looks can be achieved by eating several thousand calories per day with ample servings of junk food. *If your legs are too bulky for your liking, I suggest looking to your diet first before ditching any exercise that highly elevates the metabolism and activates a large portion of the body's musculature.*

If you're a regular reader of mine, then you know I'm big on hypotheticals. Let's say an untrained woman is currently 5'5" tall, weighs 140 lbs, and has a 30% bodyfat level. Let's say that over the next two years, she adheres to a progressive resistance training protocol that involved squatting, combined with a sound nutritional plan. Let's say that she ends up losing 10 lbs overall while gaining 100 lbs on her 10RM squat (the most weight she can squat for ten reps). Say she started at 65 lbs x 10 reps and can now squat 165 lbs x 10 reps.

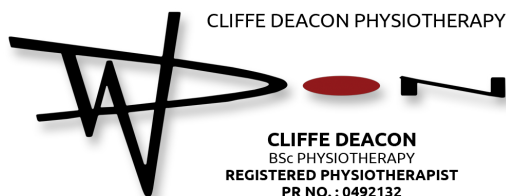
My guess would be that she will have packed on around 10 lbs of muscle during this time, but since she lost 10 lbs overall, this means that she will have lost 20 lbs of fat. She would have started out with 42 lbs of fat and ended up with 22 lbs of fat, which would reduce her bodyfat levels from 30% down to 17%, and she will have lost a lot of overall volume. She'd be denser and would have retained muscular shape in the glutes, thighs, and back, while losing fat around the hips, thighs, abs, back, and arms (over the entire body). She would look much better in terms of aesthetics. So let's not kid ourselves into thinking that squatting isn't good for the physique. Of course, in order to pack on 10 lbs of muscle while simultaneously losing 20 lbs of fat, she would have needed to have been performing a variety of exercises that combined to hit the entire body's musculature, so she'd definitely need to do more than just squat. But the point is that this hypothetical individual would not have liked her legs in the beginning and would have felt that they were too big, but in the end she would undoubtedly love her legs and appreciate her newfound squatting strength.

Can the Thighs Ever be Too Muscular When Lean?

When attaining an ultra lean physique, is there ever a situation where a woman's quads can indeed be too big? Very, very rarely. See my article showcasing [how to train for a bikini competition](#) for pictures of Ms. Bikini Olympia competitors – all of whom regularly squat. I don't see any that have giant legs.

Sometimes I like to use various physique athletes as teaching tools to my readers. I'm not into body shaming, and we all have different preferences with regards to our ideal physiques, so beauty is in the eye of the beholder. With that said, one popular fitness model is [Andreia Brazier](#). Her face is mesmerizingly beautiful, and her body kicks ass. Check out the vastus lateralis (outer quad) development on her – it's impressive!

She currently has 269K followers on Instagram, so clearly thousands of people admire her physique. I am of the opinion that she needs to chill out on squats (and lunges) and focus on more targeted glute training. You're free to think that I'm a glute snob and am overly critical.



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Please don't get me wrong, I think she is absolutely beautiful. But if I was Andreia's trainer, I would put squat and lunge variations on the back-burner and prioritize barbell hip thrusts, back extensions (done with a glute emphasis), band hip thrusts, and pendulum quadruped hip extensions. My guess is that if we did this for an entire year, we would eventually bring the glutes up to match the thighs. By the way, see the pics below and you might agree that she could stand to bring up her glutes in order to better balance out her physique.

Now, Andreia does in fact train her glutes hard. She seems to prioritize [squats](#) (she can squat around 225 lbs for 2 reps bodybuilding style – with a narrow stance and going almost to parallel), front squats, smith machine curtsy lunges, [side lunges](#), [walking lunges](#), static lunges, [semi-sumo deadlifts](#), [kb swings](#), trapbar deadlifts, and cable kickbacks. So her training is not bad at all. But she clearly has a genetic propensity to gain mass in the thighs and not in the hips. Therefore, in my opinion, she would do well with my style of training (a permanent glute specialization routine, if you will).

If I got her hip thrusting 225 lbs for 3 sets of 15-20 reps over time with a smooth tempo and a brief pause at the top of each rep, I'm sure this would make a big difference in glute shape, and if we did band hip thrusts very frequently I'm confident that all the metabolic stress accumulated would eventually translate into greater glute growth. But this is just my preference – I like more junk in the trunk in this situation since her thighs are very muscular. She has a cute little booty, and if her thighs were smaller, then it would be a perfect match in my opinion. It's all about achieving balance, and growing the thighs without growing the glutes actually makes them look smaller.

Now, Andreia might very well be perfectly content with her glute development, and some of my readers might feel that her glutes are perfect. Again, it's all about personal preference. In addition, her glutes appear to be growing based on her latest Instagram pics, so I'm eager to see what she looks like when she diets down in the future.

The point of using Andreia as an example is to note that while many of my female followers would absolutely kill to possess a physique like Andreia's, some ladies wouldn't be content if they possessed her level of quad development. Ladies in this situation would therefore want to ditch the squats (and lunges for that matter). But rare is the woman who is lean with incredibly muscular quads.

All of My Clients Squat

Let me let you in on a little secret. Check out my [Instagram](#) page. None of my female clients desire *ultra muscular* thighs. They want to lean out and lose the fat surrounding their problem areas, grow some booty, and improve their body composition. Guess what? They all squat because squatting helps them achieve their goals. Many of my female clients' thigh and hip measurements tend to stay the same over time, as does their weight, while their waist measurements always decrease. As I mentioned in my [Don't be a Slave to the Scale](#) article, measurements (and the scale for that matter) don't tell the entire story. Progress pictures always look much better after a solid year of smart nutrition and progressive overload resistance training including squats.

Wanna Know Who Else Squats?

Chances are, most of the ladies that my female followers admire in terms of their physiques do in fact squat. Check out [Nathalia Melo](#) doing [Squats](#) and [Front Squats](#). But if you think that all Nathalia does for glute development is squats, you're sorely mistaken. She also does [American deadlifts](#), [hip thrusts](#), [single leg hip thrusts](#), [band hip thrusts](#), [kneeling cable kickbacks](#), [cable kickbacks](#), [back extensions](#), [pendulum quadruped hip extensions](#), [lateral band leg raises](#), [reverse hypers](#), [leg press](#), [walking lunges](#), and many more glute exercises that you can see her doing on her [Instagram](#) page. Isn't it apropos that Nathalia and I would become instant friends based on our mutual affinity for the same glute exercises?

[Jamie Eason](#) squats. She just doesn't go too heavy on them due to a prior back injury and pre-existing spinal condition. But she'll do light squats, smith machine squats, and reverse hack squats, in addition to many other glute exercises such as lunges, hip thrusts, single leg RDLs, step ups, and more.

[Ashley Kaltwasser](#) squats. She does barbell back squats, goblet squats, smith machine squats, and lever machine squats. She also likes her lunges, kettlebell swings, hip thrusts, pendulum quadruped hip extensions, and straight leg deadlifts.

There are Many Reasons Why You Should Squat

There's more to strength training than just the positive adaptations they confer to one's physique. Here are some other benefits of squatting:

1. They're the most important foundational lift

Some people might feel that the deadlift is the foundational lift, but I believe it's the squat. The squat will build the deadlift much more so than the deadlift will build the squat. The squat is very difficult to master, and good squatters are usually able to learn and perform other lifts with great form very quickly. Of course, the same could be said for the deadlift, but the squat still tends to be labeled the king of all exercises.

2. They have incredible functional transfer

Squats will help athletic people jump higher, sprint faster, and pick heavier stuff off the ground, and they'll help the elderly stand from a seated position more efficiently while also improving balance.

3. They shape the thighs very nicely

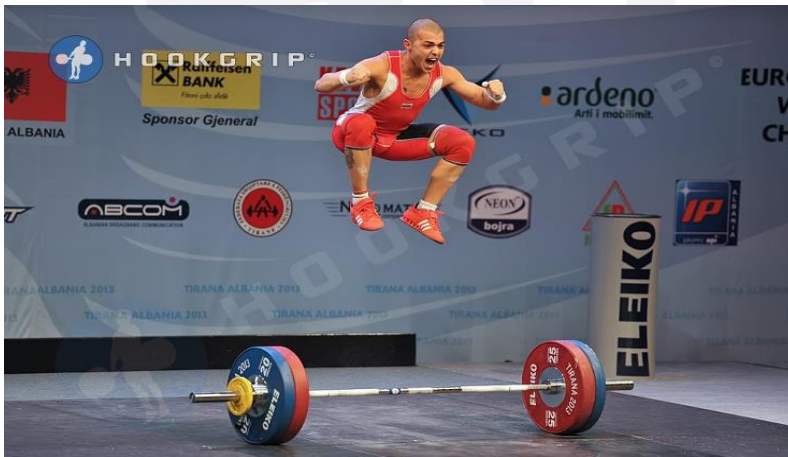
Check out Olympic weightlifters – they tend to have excellent thigh development due to all of their squatting. Squats build nice legs.

4. They build the glutes well

I've never thought that squats alone will build the best set of glutes possible, but they're definitely a great glute exercise for most people and they should definitely be included in a comprehensive glute training program.

5. They rev the metabolism

Try doing 4 sets of 10 rep back squats with 70% of 1RM with 2 min of rest in between sets. This is essentially a form of HIIT and it will keep the metabolism elevated for hours after the training session. The *afterburn* is often over-exaggerated in terms of importance in the grand scheme of things, but every little bit helps.

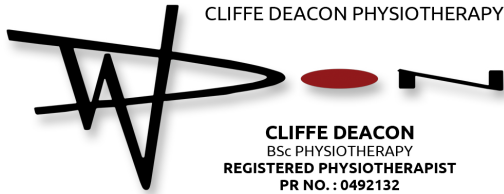


Olympic lifters squat (and pull) multiple times per week and many of them can jump through the roof

Should Everyone Squat?

No exercise is worth doing if it consistently causes pain or injury. This goes for squats, deadlifts, hip thrusts, lunges, bench press, military press, dips, chins, and bent over rows. In some circumstances, squats have been known to lead to hip pain, back pain, and knee pain. However, often resisted squatting can be altered so that the individual can better tolerate the exercise. For example, individuals who are prone to experiencing hip pain when squatting can often perform half squats (or maybe even squats to parallel) and just avoid deep squatting. Individuals who are prone to experiencing back pain when squatting can often perform goblet squats or other squat variations by adjusting the torso angle and depth of the movement. Individuals who are prone to experiencing knee pain when squatting can often perform box squats to parallel where they sit back and keep their shins vertical and knees out. So I wouldn't be quick to ditch the squat altogether before experimenting with different variations

However, not every body is built to squat, and one can attain a very functional body and pleasing physique by avoiding the squat and instead sticking to single leg squatting movements and posterior chain movements



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Conclusion

The squat is the king of exercises for good reason. They'll help you be a better lifter, a better athlete, and more versatile in everyday tasks. They'll also help build firm and shapely thighs and glutes.

How your legs look as a result of squatting has very much to do with the way you are eating. If you're eating at a caloric surplus, then they'll likely increase in size, but if you're eating at a caloric deficit, they'll likely decrease in size but retain their muscular shape.

If you train primarily for aesthetics and you reach a point where you are very happy with the size and shape of your legs, then don't feel compelled to perpetually increase your strength in squats year after year after year. Jessica Alba does her squats but she only uses a medicine ball. Jamie Eason sticks to bodyweight or light squats due to a pre-existing spinal condition but she still trains the movement. The [goblet squat](#) happens to be an excellent squat variation that can be performed very frequently and will help engrain proper squatting mechanics. Nathalia Melo and Ashley Kaltwasser squat to attain their world class legs and glutes. But each of the ladies mentioned in this article also perform a large variety of exercises, so make sure you do more than just squat.

