



HEALTH

Shoulder it

As designers bring the upper body into renewed focus, spend the cooler months prepping for a glorious spring. By Remy Rippon.

There was a definite moment recently, when Bella Hadid sashayed down the runway at Brandon Maxwell's show in New York, that seemed to set the tone for the season. It wasn't so much the mint-green strapless midi-dress she was sporting as the ultra-toned expanse of flesh on display – upper back, shoulders, arms and neckline – that turned heads. While we may be transitioning out of singlet weather, the message was clear: shoulders are front and centre.

Elsewhere this season, hemlines took a hiatus in favour of a new upper-body erogenous zone. At Versace, Isabel Marant and Marc Jacobs, toned limbs provided the ultimate coat-hanger for the artful drape of off-the-shoulder garbs, and at Givenchy, even when shoulders weren't on display, they were put to good use with clever suiting that made them seem all the more angular and apparent. Peekaboo flashes of shoulder via creative cut-outs showed up at Jonathan Simkhai and Roland Mouret, too. →

And at Erdem, while the runway was awash with ballooning, show-stopper sleeves, it was the interjecting strapless looks that spoke volumes.

The top half is now also top of mind in the gym, with Sydney's best trainers seeing a switch in thinking from Instagram-annointed 'leg days' to a focus on the region from the waist up.

"Everyone wants toned arms," says Fluidform Pilates director Kirsten King, whose client list includes fashion designer Pip Edwards and influencer Nicole Warne, who visited King's Waterloo studio in Sydney religiously in the lead-up her to wedding (notably, her toned shoulder-line was on full display in her ivory Valentino gown). The key to long, toned limbs, she says, starts first with strengthening through the upper back and shoulders, which has a knock-on effect throughout the rest of the body. "When you don't have strength through your upper back and shoulders, it makes it almost impossible to get tone through your arms without injury or bulking the wrong area," she says, stressing the importance of the stabilising muscles and muscle groups that create the appearance of length and tone.

Sydney-based personal trainer Ricardo Riskalla agrees that when it comes to the upper body, it pays to take a holistic view. "Like all body parts, it is important to analyse the body as a whole and create balance between lower and upper body." When toning shoulders and arms, he says the simplest methods that utilise your own body weight are the most effective. "That will avoid bulking up and will result in amazing arms and shoulders," he notes. "Secondly, make sure all exercises are performed in high repetitions: instead of doing sets, think about doing the same exercise for five minutes or more."

If you're of the school of thought that strength training, particularly when it comes to the upper body, will add unnecessary bulk, it's time to retrain your thinking. A game-changing study by the University of California found that, particularly as we age, our quantity of muscle mass is strongly linked with life span: the stronger we are, the longer we live. And women especially can benefit from lifting: resistance training aids bone density, a vital concern for ageing women, whose levels of the bone-protecting hormone oestrogen deplete after menopause.

Upper-body strength training may also complement high-intensity interval training (HIIT) workouts, which have found favour among time-poor women looking for maximum results. These cortisol-inducing intense workouts, while beneficial if done properly, can lead to injury if they're not interspersed with resistance and strength sessions. "Muscles are like elastics that have the power to move our bones in several directions," enthuses Riskalla, noting this flexibility reduces the risk of injury. Runners can also benefit from an upper-body workout. According to a 2015 paper by University of Madrid researchers, when runners included two to three strength sessions per week in their training regimen, they saw better 'running economy', that is, they utilised three to four per cent less oxygen when running.

With our wardrobes set to be peppered with these shoulder-endorsing looks, it also puts the spotlight back on another crucial element: posture. No number of repetitions will correct lousy alignment, says King, noting it as the central factor for general strength. "The most important area to focus on when trying to achieve overall tone in the body is your posture. What people don't realise is if their body

“What people don't realise is if their body is not in its optimal posture they will struggle to connect with their core muscles”

is not in its optimal posture they will struggle to connect with their core muscles.”

Beyond the gym, a strong back and shoulders and a proud posture may even help us mentally. In a 2015 study, researchers found that a sturdy posture can increase positive thoughts, and sitting upright might even help build resilience in stressful situations.

Want to appear stronger or more confident in work situations? Your upper body might help with that, too. In the second most-watched TED talk of all time, Harvard Business School associate professor Amy Cuddy popularised the term 'power pose': the notion that an expansive posture – strong shoulders, hands on hips – has the ability to make us feel more powerful and robust, particularly in a corporate environment. Hadid's aforementioned runway stride might be a far cry from your typical corporate set-up, but if her strong-shouldered stance signalled anything this season it's that she's rightfully not lacking in the confidence department. And that's something we could all learn from.

WALK THE PLANK

Forgo dumbbells in favour of a shoulder workout, developed by Fluidform Pilates, that relies on your own body weight.

1 FOUR-POINT KNEELING TRICEPS

Start kneeling on all fours with your hands under your shoulders and your knees under your hips. Drift forward while bending your elbows backwards, taking your chest towards the ground. Count two seconds as you drift towards the ground and two seconds to return your body back to the starting position.

2 WIDE ARM PUSH-UP

Start with your knees together in a modified plank position. Your hands are out wide and directly under your elbows and your knees are slightly behind your hips. Send your weight down towards the ground, bending your elbows wide as you travel down to just above the ground.

3 PLANK WITH ELBOW BEND

Start in a plank position. Keep pushing back through your heels to keep your abs engaged. Inhale to gently bend your elbows and exhale to push your arms back out straight.