

The Beginner's Guide to the Dead Hang



Building Strength, Healthy Shoulders, and Calm Under Load

By Richard Chen

ISSA Certified PT & YMCA Beginner & Senior Strength Coach

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Before beginning any new exercise or movement practice, consult with a qualified healthcare professional, especially if you have a history of injury, pain, or medical conditions.

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Always work within a pain-free range and stop any exercise that causes discomfort beyond normal training sensations.

This guide emphasizes gradual progression, joint awareness, and listening to your body.

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Pro-Tip: You don't need to read this guide in order. Start where it's most helpful for you.

Why the Dead Hang

The dead hang is one of the simplest movements in strength training - and one of the most misunderstood.

At a glance, it looks like nothing more than holding onto a bar. But when practiced intentionally, it becomes a powerful tool for improving shoulder health, grip strength, posture, and overall body awareness.

More importantly, it teaches a skill many people are missing in their training: **how to stay relaxed, controlled, and present while the body is under stress.**

I don't believe strength needs to be loud or rushed. The dead hang taught me that control, breathing, and patience matter more than forcing effort - especially when it comes to long-term joint health.

This guide is meant to help you build strength in a way your body can actually tolerate and benefit from. Move slowly, stay curious, and let the work support you instead of fighting it.

Why should we hang?

Spinal Decompression

Modern life keeps us compressed - sitting, driving, and spending hours looking down at screens. Hanging allows the spine to gently lengthen and unload, often reducing stiffness and tension in the lower back.

Shoulder Health

When done correctly, hanging helps restore natural shoulder positioning,

improves scapular control, and builds resilience in the muscles that protect the joint.

Grip Strength & Longevity

Grip strength is more than just hand strength. Large studies have shown that hand-grip strength is one of the strongest predictors of long-term health, independence, and overall functional capacity.

Mental Control

Hanging teaches you how to stay calm when your body wants to let go. That ability to regulate tension and breath carries far beyond the bar.

Shoulder Health & Preparation

Dead hangs can be incredibly beneficial for the shoulders - **but only when your joints are prepared to handle them.**

I'm not someone who's avoided shoulder pain throughout my training life. What I've learned over time is that shoulders don't respond well to being ignored or pushed through.

What changed things for me wasn't training harder - it was learning what the shoulder is designed to do and supporting that function intentionally.

The exercises below are the ones I rely on most for shoulder health. I use them consistently in my own training and share them with clients because they help the shoulders feel more stable, resilient, and confident when hanging.

A Note From My Own Training (Optional Context)

In 2011, I dealt with my first serious shoulder impingement. The pain was sharp, and for a period of time I could barely raise my arm overhead. It came from excessive pushing work without balance or recovery - in my case, hundreds of push-ups a day.

That experience wasn't a complete reset of how I trained - it was a wake-up call. I realized I couldn't just "sleep off" injuries or expect my body to bounce back if I kept ignoring the details. If I wanted to train long-term, I needed to understand what joints are meant to do, not just how hard I could push them.

Since then, I've dealt with other injuries as well. Each time, the approach was the same: slow down, get specific, and choose exercises that supported healing rather than aggravation.

You don't need to master all of this at once. These exercises are tools - not requirements - and they work best when applied patiently and consistently.

1. Banded Serratus Anterior Punches

(Scapular Control & Upward Rotation)



Shoulders retracted



Shoulders protracted

Why it matters:

The serratus anterior helps the shoulder blade rotate and position correctly as

the arm goes overhead. When it's underactive, hanging can feel pinchy or unstable.

How to Do It:

Anchor a light resistance band behind you at chest height. Hold the band with your arm extended in front of you. Keeping the elbow straight, gently reach forward by moving the shoulder blade, then slowly return.

Key Focus:

Smooth motion. No shrugging. Keep the neck relaxed.

Sets/Reps:

2-3 sets of 10-15 reps per arm

2. Hanging Scapula Raises (or Assisted Scapula Raises)

(Shoulder Stability in the Hang)



Start with relaxed hang



Pull shoulders down to raise scapula

Why it matters:

Teaches active shoulder control while hanging - a key skill for long-term joint health.

How to Do It:

Hang from a pull-up bar with arms fully extended. Without bending the elbows, gently pull the shoulder blades down and slightly back, lifting the body just a small amount. Slowly return to a relaxed hang.

Use light foot contact on the floor or a box if needed.

Key Focus:

Small range. No jerking. No elbow bend.

Sets/Reps:

2-3 sets of 6-10 reps

3. Banded External Rotations

(Rotator Cuff Support)



Start position



End position

Why it matters:

The rotator cuff helps center the shoulder joint during hanging and overhead movement.

How to Do It:

Attach a light resistance band at elbow height. Keep your elbow tucked to your side and rotate the forearm outward slowly. Control the return.

Key Focus:

Slow tempo. No shoulder rolling forward.

Sets/Reps:

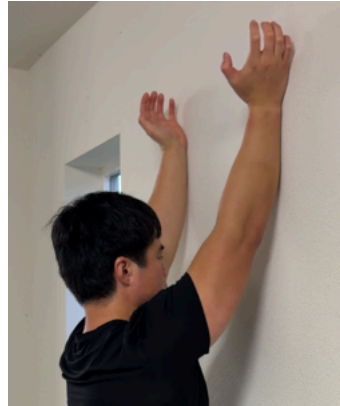
2-3 sets of 12-15 reps per arm

4. Wall Slides

(Pain-Free Overhead Patterning)



Start position



Slide arms up, then back down

Why it matters:

Reinforces healthy overhead motion without loading the joint.

How to Do It:

Stand with your back and forearms against a wall. Slowly slide your arms upward while maintaining contact. Stop before any pain or pinching.

Key Focus:

Controlled movement. Easy breathing.

Sets/Reps:

2 sets of 8-12 reps

How to Use These With Your Hanging Practice

These are best used **before hanging** as preparation, or on off days.

- Choose 2-3 exercises before hanging
- Keep all movements pain-free
- Prioritize quality over effort

Three Levels of Beginner Hanging

Important: Always work within a pain-free range. When in doubt, use assistance.

Level 1: The Assisted Hang

Setup: Place a box, bench, or chair under the bar.

Execution: Keep some weight through your feet so your arms support only part of your bodyweight. Let the shoulders relax naturally.

Goal: 3 sets of 30 seconds



Level 2: The Passive Dead Hang

Execution: Hang freely. Allow the shoulders to rise naturally. Relax the lower body and breathe slowly.

Goal: 3 sets of 45-60 seconds



Level 3: The Active Hang

Execution: From a passive hang, gently pull the shoulder blades down and back without bending the arms.

Goal: 4-5 sets of 20-30 seconds



Beginner's Protocol

Perform 3-4 times per week.

Warm-Up: 1-2 minutes of arm circles and wrist rolls.

Main Work: 3-5 total sets at your highest pain-free level.

Finish: End with one assisted hang for 45-60 seconds to reset.

When (and If) to Add Weight

Weighted dead hangs get a lot of attention online - but they are **not where beginners should start**, and they're not required for shoulder health or longevity.

Before adding any external weight, your body should already feel comfortable and confident hanging from a bar under **your own bodyweight**.

Build the Foundation First

Weighted hanging only makes sense once you've built a strong base with bodyweight movements. That foundation comes from:

- Consistent passive and active dead hangs
- Pull-ups and chin-ups (assisted or unassisted)
- Scapula raises and controlled hanging positions
- General comfort supporting your full bodyweight from the bar

These movements teach your shoulders, elbows, hands, and nervous system how to **share load**, stay organized, and remain calm under tension.

If bodyweight hanging still feels unstable, rushed, or stressful on your joints, adding weight will only magnify those issues.

A Simple Readiness Check

You may be *ready to explore* light added weight if all of the following are true:

- You can hang comfortably at bodyweight for **60+ seconds** without pain
- Your shoulders feel stable and controlled, not pinchy or frantic
- Your grip fatigue feels muscular, not sharp or joint-based
- You can perform controlled active hangs and scapula raises
- You regularly train pull-ups or chin-ups with good form

Even then, **weight is optional**, not mandatory.

How to Think About Progressive Overload

Progression doesn't have to mean "add weight." Before external load, you can progress by:

- Increasing hang time
- Improving breathing control
- Moving from assisted → passive → active hangs
- Cleaning up body position and reducing swinging
- Improving comfort across different grip styles

If you do choose to add weight, keep it conservative:

- Start with **very small increments** (5–10 lbs)
- Maintain perfect control and calm breathing
- Keep weighted hangs **shorter** than bodyweight hangs
- Stop immediately if joints feel irritated or unstable

Pro-Tip: Weighted hangs should feel like a **natural extension** of your bodyweight practice - not a separate, ego-driven goal.

Details That Make a Difference

Small details dramatically change how effective - and joint-friendly - your dead hang feels. These are the cues that turn “just hanging” into a full-body, intentional practice.

Grip Type: Choosing the Right Hand Position

There are three common grip styles for hanging. Each has a purpose, but not all are ideal for beginners.

Pronated Grip (Overhand, palms facing away)



This is the **best starting grip** for most beginners. If you're new to hanging or working on shoulder comfort, start here.

- Encourages balanced shoulder positioning
- Transfers well to pull-ups and general shoulder health
- Helps prevent over-reliance on the biceps

Neutral Grip (Palms facing each other)



Often the most joint-friendly option if available.

- Very comfortable for shoulders and elbows
- Great for people with a history of elbow or shoulder irritation
- Excellent for longer hangs and control work

Supinated Grip (Underhand, palms facing you)



Useful, but not ideal for beginners. If you use this grip, keep durations conservative and stay attentive to how your elbows feel.

- Increases biceps involvement
- Can place more strain on elbows and shoulders
- Better suited for experienced lifters or short, intentional hangs

Bottom line: Most beginners should start with a **pronated or neutral grip**, focusing on comfort, control, and consistency rather than variety.

Core Control & Body Position: Preventing Energy Leaks

A good dead hang is a **full-body position**, not just a grip exercise. Key body cues:

- Legs fully extended, feet in front of body
- Light squeeze through the inner thighs and glutes
- Core lightly braced (think “quiet tension,” not a hard flex)

Pro-Tip: Aim for a **subtle hollow body position** - ribs down, pelvis neutral - without excessive tension. This keeps your body from swinging and prevents energy from leaking out through loose limbs.

Grip Intent: Firm, Not Frantic

Rather than squeezing the bar as hard as possible right away:

- Apply steady, even pressure through the entire hand
- Let tension build gradually as the hang progresses

Pro-Tip: Over-squeezing early often leads to faster fatigue and unnecessary tension in the neck and shoulders.

Breathing: Staying Calm Under Load

Breathing is what keeps the hang from turning into a panic response.

Use this simple approach:

- Inhale through the nose, slow and controlled
- Exhale gently through the nose or pursed lips
- Let the exhale be slightly longer than the inhale

Pro-Tip: Avoid holding your breath. If your breathing becomes rushed or erratic, the set has gone past its useful range.

Taking the Next Step

Dead hangs are just the beginning.

If you'd like help applying these principles to your own body, goals, and training history, I offer [1-on-1 Deep Bloux Coaching](#), both in person and online. Every coaching relationship begins with a consultation, where I take the time to learn about you, answer your questions, and build a plan that fits your needs and health background.

[Apply for 1-on-1 Deep Bloux Coaching](#)

Not quite ready for coaching yet?

You can also follow along as I train for my [Guinness World Record attempt for the heaviest dead hang](#), where I share training insights, progress, and lessons along the way.