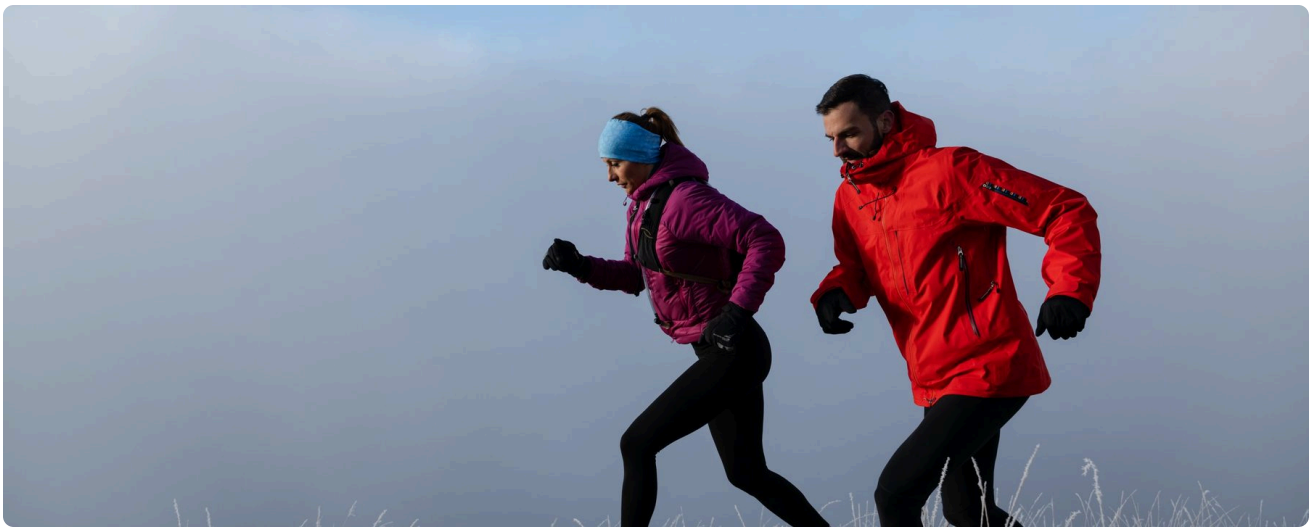
Program guide: aerobic fitness

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Build up to 150 minutes or more of cardio a week, mostly at an easy, conversational pace, with one interval session and one long session, plus two short strength days. Aerobic fitness is how well your heart, lungs and muscles take in and use oxygen.

Why it matters: Aerobic fitness is one of the strongest predictors of a long life, and it responds quickly to training. Every part of this program is aimed at raising it safely, whether you're starting with walks or building toward a race.

The program at a glance

Setting	Aerobic fitness program
Cardio	5 days a week; about 110 minutes to start walking, about 175 minutes once you build your base
Easy sessions	Talk-in-full-sentences pace
Hard session	1 a week: 4 to 6 rounds of 2 to 3 minutes hard, 2 to 3 minutes easy
Long session	1 a week, about 60 minutes, easy
Strength days	2 a week, about 20 to 35 minutes, machines
Strength sets and reps	2 sets of 10 to 15 reps; the planner adds a few where needed
Rest	1 minute between strength sets
Total time	About 3 to 4 hours a week

The workouts

Start with walking (start here): for people new to cardio. Walk about 20 minutes on most days, one walk of 30 minutes, and two short strength days. Add about 5 minutes a week until you reach 150 minutes or more.

Build your aerobic base: mostly easy cardio, one interval session, one long session and two short strength days.

Training for a race? The event plans (your first 5K through your first century ride) build on this base. Plan workouts links to each one.

A sample week (build your aerobic base):

Day	Session
Monday	Strength A: leg press, leg curl, chest press, row
Tuesday	Intervals, 35 minutes: warm up, then 4 to 6 rounds of 2 to 3 minutes hard and 2 to 3 minutes easy
Wednesday	Easy cardio, 40 minutes
Thursday	Strength B: back extension, shoulder press, pull-down
Friday	Easy cardio, 40 minutes
Saturday	Long, easy session, 60 minutes
Sunday	Rest

Easy means you can talk in full sentences. **Hard** means you can say only a few words at a time.

Why this much cardio

- **Fitness predicts lifespan.** A 2009 meta-analysis of 33 studies with about 103,000 adults found each 1-MET gain in fitness was linked to a 13% lower risk of death [1]. A MET is the energy you burn at rest; one MET is roughly the difference of jogging about 0.6 mph faster.
- **150 minutes and up.** In a study of 116,221 adults followed for 30 years, the lowest risk of death came at about 300 to 600 moderate minutes, or 150 to 300 vigorous minutes, a week, with no sign of harm beyond that [2].
- **Start where you are.** Even below 150 minutes, activity was linked to a 20% lower risk of death than none [3]. That's why the walking plan starts at about 110 minutes and builds.

Why five sessions a week

- **More sessions, fewer non-responders.** In a 2017 trial, 78 healthy adults trained 1 to 5 times a week for 6 weeks, 60 minutes a session [4]. Among those training once a week, 69% didn't measurably improve; among those training 4 or 5 times, everyone did. Non-responders who then added two sessions a week all improved.

Why mostly easy, with one hard session

- **Intervals add a small edge.** A 2015 meta-analysis of 28 trials with 723 healthy adults found high-intensity intervals raised aerobic fitness slightly more than steady cardio, by about 1.2 units of VO2max (milliliters of oxygen per kilogram of body weight per minute) [5].
- **But both work, and easy work is easier to repeat.** Steady cardio raised fitness by 4.9 units and intervals by 5.5, compared with no exercise [5].
- **Mostly easy works.** In a 2024 meta-analysis of 17 studies and 437 athletes, a polarized week (mostly easy sessions, a few very hard ones) and other mixes produced the same race times and performance tests [6]. Lots of easy time plus some hard work is the common thread.
- **One hard session a week** gets the interval benefit without piling up fatigue for a new exerciser.

Why the long session

- **Time at an easy pace builds the base.** A weekly long session of about an hour adds a big share of the week's minutes without extra intensity, and it prepares you for longer events.

Why two strength days

- **Strength adds its own benefit.** A 2022 meta-analysis linked muscle-strengthening activity to a 10% to 17% lower risk of early death and major diseases, regardless of aerobic exercise [7].
- **It won't cancel your cardio, or the reverse.** A 2022 meta-analysis of 43 studies found adding cardio to lifting didn't reduce muscle growth or maximum strength [8].
- **Machines, 2 sets of 10 to 15 reps, 1 minute rest.** Light enough to leave your legs fresh for cardio, and quick: about 20 to 35 minutes. The planner adds a set where a big muscle group gets fewer than 4 hard sets a week.

How it progresses

1. **Walking plan:** add about 5 minutes a week to your walks until you reach 150 minutes or more, then switch to "Build your aerobic base."

2. **Base plan:** add 5 to 10 minutes to the long session every week or two, or add a round to the intervals.
3. **Strength days:** Today's workout adds a rep each workout, then 5 lb (upper body) or 10 lb (lower body) when every set reaches 15.
4. **Test yourself** every 6 to 8 weeks (see "Test your own fitness").

Reality check: The fitness and lifespan figures come from observational studies, which show links rather than proof of cause. The trial on sessions per week was small and lasted 6 weeks.

How sure are we: Strong that higher aerobic fitness is linked to longer life. Strong that both steady cardio and intervals raise fitness. Moderate that training 4 or 5 times a week means nearly everyone improves.

Related guides

- Test your own fitness
- A 10-minute warm-up
- Plan: your first 5K

Related articles

- The cardio dose
- How much exercise is enough?
- Endurance training basics

Sources

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