Program guide: body composition

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Eat a little less than you burn, lift two to four times a week to keep your muscle, and do plenty of cardio. Body composition is how much of your weight is fat and how much is lean tissue such as muscle, bone and water.

Why it matters: Eating less does most of the fat loss. Lifting decides whether what you lose is fat or muscle. This program pairs short strength sessions with more cardio than the other programs, so more of every pound lost comes from fat.

The program at a glance

Setting	Body composition program
Strength days	2 or 3 full-body days, or 4 days split upper and lower body
Session length	About 25 to 45 minutes
Sets	2 per exercise; the planner adds a few where needed
Reps	8 to 15 on main exercises, 10 to 15 on extras
Effort	Stop each set with 1 to 3 reps left in the tank
Rest	1½ minutes on main exercises, 1 minute on extras
Weekly target	At least 4 hard sets for each big muscle group
Cardio	About 120 to 240 minutes a week; more with fewer strength days
Eating	A modest calorie deficit and about 0.7 grams of protein per pound of body weight a day
Total time	About 4 to 5 hours a week

The workouts

Machines (start here): short machine sessions plus cardio.

Machines and free weights: dumbbells and barbells for the main lifts, such as squats, Romanian deadlifts and dumbbell presses, and machines for the rest.

Choose your days:

- **2 days:** full body twice, with the most cardio: three 45-minute sessions, a 75-minute walk, hike or ride, and a 30-minute easy walk.
- **3 days (the default):** full body three times, with two 40-minute cardio sessions, a 60-minute walk, hike or class, and a 20-minute easy walk.
- **4 days:** two upper-body and two lower-body days of about 25 to 35 minutes, plus three cardio sessions.

A sample 3-day week (machines):

Day	Session
Monday	Strength A: leg press, leg curl, chest press, row, ab crunch
Tuesday	Cardio, 40 minutes
Wednesday	Strength B: hack squat, back extension, shoulder press, pull-down, Pallof press
Thursday	Cardio, 40 minutes
Friday	Strength C: hip thrust machine, incline press, cable row, biceps curl
Saturday	Longer walk, hike or class, 60 minutes
Sunday	Easy walk, 20 minutes

Why eat less

- **Exercise alone does little for weight.** A 2021 overview of 12 systematic reviews and 149 studies found exercise programs on their own took off 3.3 to 7.7 lb of weight and 2.9 to 5.7 lb of fat [1].
- **Diet plus lifting does much more.** A 2022 meta-analysis of 114 trials found lifting combined with eating less removed about 11.7 lb of fat, while lean mass held steady on average [2].
- **Keep the deficit modest.** A 2022 meta-analysis found lifters eating well below their needs gained less lean mass; the model predicted no average gain at a deficit of roughly 500 calories a day [3]. Strength gains held up either way. See "Calories and energy balance" for your number.

Why these exercises

- **Full-body compound movements.** Squat or leg press, hip hinge, push, pull and core each session, so every big muscle gets trained while you diet.
- **Lifting protects muscle.** In the 2021 overview, lifting reduced lean-mass loss during weight loss by about 1.8 lb [1].
- **Including on weight-loss drugs.** In a 2026 trial of 120 adults aged 50 to 70 on tirzepatide, three lifting sessions a week cut lean-tissue loss by about a quarter, and strength rose instead of falling [13].
- **No ab circuits for belly fat.** In a 2011 trial, six weeks of abdominal exercises didn't reduce belly fat compared with no exercise [4]. Fat comes off across the whole body.
- **Machines or free weights.** They build similar muscle [5]. Machines are quicker to learn, which helps when you're also adding cardio.

Why these sets and reps

- **2 sets, at least 4 hard sets per muscle a week.** A 2026 analysis of 67 studies found gains with as few as 4 hard sets per muscle group a week [6]. When you're eating less, the goal is to keep muscle, and a modest dose does that without eating into recovery. The planner adds a set where a big muscle group falls short.
- **8 to 15 reps, 1 to 3 short of failure.** Heavy, moderate and light loads built similar muscle when sets ended close to failure [7]. Moderate reps keep the weights manageable when energy is lower.

Why this rest

- **1½ minutes on main exercises, 1 minute on extras.** Rests over 60 seconds gave a small growth benefit, with no clear further gain beyond about 90 seconds [8]. Shorter sessions leave more time for cardio.

Why this much cardio

- **Cardio adds fat loss and fitness.** In a 2017 meta-analysis, intervals took off about 3.7 lb of body fat and steady cardio about 4.6 lb, a difference that wasn't significant [9]. Pick the kind you'll keep doing.
- **It won't undo your lifting.** A 2022 meta-analysis of 43 studies found adding cardio didn't reduce muscle growth or maximum strength [10].
- **It helps keep weight off.** People in the National Weight Control Registry who kept off an average of about 73 pounds for more than five years reported about an hour of activity a day [11]. That's why the 2-day option builds toward about 240 minutes a week.

Why the protein

- **About 0.7 grams per pound of body weight a day** (1.6 grams per kilogram). In a 2018 meta-analysis of 49 trials, muscle gains from extra protein leveled off around that amount [12]. Protein also keeps you fuller on fewer calories.

How it progresses

1. **Strength:** Today's workout adds one rep to one set each workout. When every set reaches the top of the range, the weight goes up 5 lb (upper body) or 10 lb (lower body). Holding your strength while you lose weight is a win.
2. **Cardio:** add 5 to 10 minutes a week until you reach your option's total.
3. **Track weekly averages,** not daily weigh-ins, plus your waist every two weeks (see "Measuring your progress").

4. **When you reach your goal,** raise calories gradually and keep the training (see "Keeping weight off").

If food or weight feels out of control: If you're restricting hard, bingeing, purging, or exercising to make up for eating, talk to your doctor or call the National Alliance for Eating Disorders helpline at 1-866-662-1235 (weekdays, staffed by licensed therapists).

Reality check: Most trials lasted weeks to months, and long-term results depend on keeping the habits. The registry data come from people who chose to join, so they show what successful maintainers do, not proof that each habit works.

How sure are we: Strong that eating less does most of the fat loss. Moderate that lifting while dieting protects muscle. Strong that cardio doesn't cancel lifting gains for muscle size and maximum strength.

Related guides

- Reading a Nutrition Facts label
- Your first day at the gym
- Missed a week? Getting back on track

Related articles

- Training for fat loss vs. muscle gain
- Calories and energy balance
- The protein dose
- Keeping weight off

Sources

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