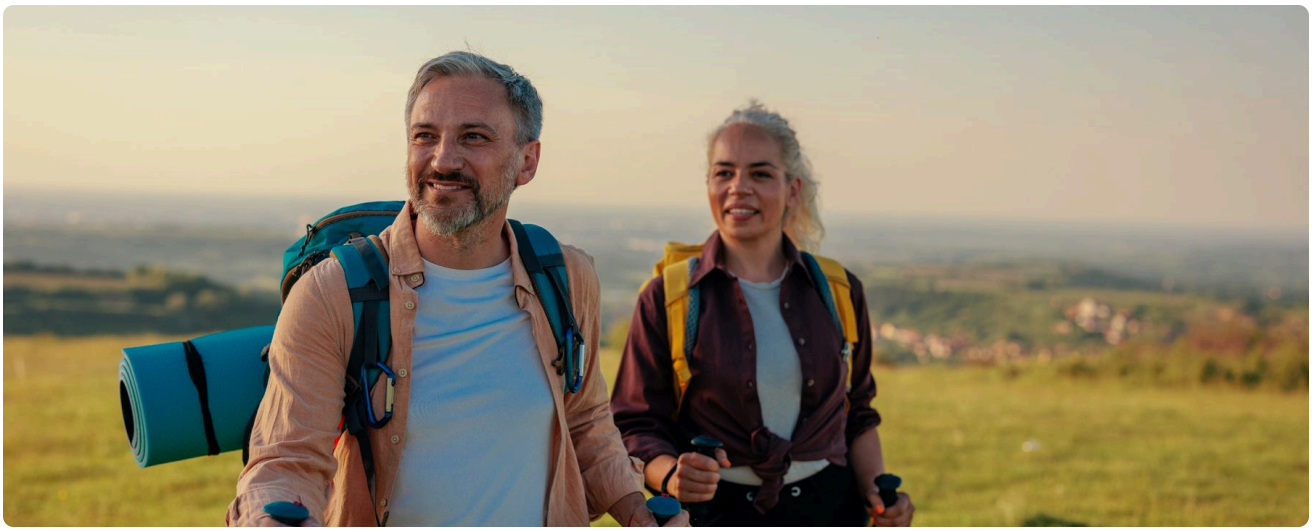
Program guide: general fitness

Last reviewed: November 10, 2026



Two or three short machine workouts and about 150 minutes of walking or other cardio a week. It's the smallest dose of exercise that delivers most of the health benefit, and the best place to start.

Why it matters: The biggest health payoff comes from the first step up from doing nothing. Every choice in this program, from the machines to the number of sets, is there to get you that payoff in the least time, with the least to learn.

The program at a glance

Setting	General fitness program
Strength days	2 or 3 a week, full body
Session length	About 30 to 45 minutes
Exercises	4 or 5 per workout, all on machines
Sets	2 per exercise; the planner adds a few where needed
Reps	8 to 15 (core 10 to 15)
Effort	Stop each set with 1 to 3 reps left in the tank
Rest	1½ minutes between sets (1 minute for core and arms)
Weekly target	At least 4 hard sets for each big muscle group
Cardio	About 150 minutes a week of walking or other cardio
Total time	About 4 hours a week

The workouts

Machines (start here): every exercise is on a machine or cable, so there's no balance or barbell technique to learn first.

Choose your days:

- **2 days:** Strength A and Strength B, full body, plus four walks or cardio sessions of about 40 minutes.
- **3 days:** Strength A, B and C, full body, plus three cardio sessions of about 50 minutes.

What each workout covers:

Movement	Example machines
Squat (front thighs and glutes)	Leg press, hack squat
Hip hinge and hamstrings	Leg curl, back extension, hip thrust machine
Push	Chest press, shoulder press, incline press
Pull	Chest-supported row, lat pull-down, cable row
Core	Ab crunch machine, Pallof press

A sample 2-day week:

Day	Session
Monday	Strength A: leg press, leg curl, chest press, row, ab crunch
Tuesday	Walk or cardio, 40 minutes
Wednesday	Walk or cardio, 40 minutes
Thursday	Strength B: back extension, shoulder press, pull-down, Pallof press
Friday	Walk or cardio, 40 minutes
Saturday	Walk or cardio, 40 minutes
Sunday	Rest

Plan workouts builds your exact week, and you can swap any exercise for another that trains the same movement.

Why these exercises

- **One exercise per movement covers the whole body.** Compound exercises (ones that move two or more joints, such as the leg press) train several muscles at once. In a 2023 meta-analysis, adding single-joint exercises to compound ones didn't add measurable whole-muscle growth on average [1]. Four or five compound movements are enough.
- **Machines first.** In a 2023 meta-analysis of 13 studies with 1,016 people, machines and free weights built similar muscle [2]. Strength gains were specific: each group got strongest on the equipment it trained with.
- **Machines are easier to learn.** The path of the weight is fixed and you can't drop a bar on yourself, so you can work hard safely from week one.
- **Core work is included** because the program has no barbell lifts that train the trunk along the way.

Why these sets and reps

- **2 sets per exercise, at least 4 hard sets per muscle a week.** A 2026 analysis of 67 studies found strength and muscle gains with as few as 4 hard sets per muscle group a week. More sets built more, with smaller gains for each one added [3].
- **A hard set** is one that ends close to failure (the point where you can't do another rep with good form).
- **The planner fills gaps.** It counts the sets each muscle gets across the week and adds a set or two where a big muscle group falls short of 4, as long as the workout stays under about 45 minutes. That's why a few exercises show 3 or 4 sets.

- **8 to 15 reps.** In a 2021 network meta-analysis of 28 studies, heavy, moderate and light loads built similar muscle when sets went close to failure [4]. Heavy loads built more strength. A moderate range lets beginners learn each machine with a weight that isn't too heavy, and still builds both.
- **1 to 3 reps short of failure.** A 2022 meta-analysis of 15 studies found no significant difference in strength or muscle growth between training to failure and stopping short [5]. Stopping short is easier to recover from and easier to enjoy.

Why this rest

- **About 1½ minutes.** In a 2024 meta-analysis of 9 studies, rests longer than 60 seconds gave a small, uncertain benefit for muscle growth, with no clear further gain beyond about 90 seconds [6].
- **Shorter rest for core and arm exercises,** which tire a smaller amount of muscle.

Why two or three days

- **How often matters less than total sets.** A 2019 meta-analysis found that with weekly sets matched, training a muscle more often made no meaningful difference to growth [7]. Two full-body days already train each muscle twice.
- **Strength practice helps a little.** In the 2026 analysis, more frequent training helped strength, with each added day helping less [3]. A third day suits people who like the routine.

Why the cardio

- **About 150 minutes a week.** In a pooled analysis of 661,137 adults, 150 to 300 minutes a week of moderate activity was linked to a 31% lower risk of death than none [8].
- **Some is better than none.** Any activity below that minimum was still linked to a 20% lower risk [8].
- **Lifting adds to it.** A 2022 meta-analysis linked muscle-strengthening activity to a 10% to 17% lower risk of early death, heart disease, cancer and diabetes, and people who did both lifting and aerobic activity had a 40% lower risk of death than people who did neither [9].

How it progresses

1. **Start light.** Pick a weight you could lift a few more times than the bottom of the range.
2. **Add a rep each workout.** Today's workout adds one rep to one set each time.
3. **Then add weight.** When every set reaches 15 reps, the weight goes up 5 lb for upper-body exercises or 10 lb for lower-body ones, and the reps start over at 8.

4. **Miss a target?** Repeat the same targets next time.

In a 2022 trial of 43 trained adults, adding reps at the same weight built muscle about as well as adding weight [10].

Reality check: Most training studies lasted weeks to a few months and tested younger adults. The health numbers come from observational studies, which show links rather than proof of cause.

How sure are we: Strong that a little strength training plus 150 minutes of cardio is linked to lower risk of early death. Strong that machines and free weights build similar muscle. Moderate that 4 hard sets per muscle a week is enough to see gains.

Related guides

- Your first day at the gym
- How to use a weight machine
- A 10-minute warm-up

Related articles

- How much exercise is enough?
- The strength training dose
- The cardio dose

Sources

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