Program guide: hypertrophy

Last reviewed: November 10, 2026



At least 10 hard sets a week for each major muscle, spread over three or four sessions, with sets of 8 to 15 reps that end close to failure. Hypertrophy (hi-PER-truh-fee) is the trainer's word for muscle growth.

Why it matters: The number of hard sets each muscle gets in a week is the strongest lever for growth, more than the rep range or the split. This program is built to hit that number for all eight major muscle groups.

The program at a glance

Setting	Hypertrophy program
Strength days	3 full-body days, or 4 days (upper and lower body, or push and pull)
Session length	About 45 to 70 minutes
Main lifts	3 sets of 8 to 12 reps
Single-muscle exercises	3 sets of 10 to 15 reps
Effort	End each set 1 to 3 reps short of failure
Rest	2 minutes on main lifts, 1 minute on single-muscle exercises
Weekly target	At least 10 hard sets each for quads, glutes, hamstrings, chest, back, shoulders, biceps and triceps
Cardio	About 150 minutes a week
Total time	About 6 hours a week

The workouts

Machines (start here): machines and cables only. Easy to learn, and safe to push close to failure without a spotter.

Free weights: barbells, dumbbells and body weight.

Compound lifts + isolation supersets: big free-weight lifts first, then single-muscle exercises paired back to back at one station (such as curls and triceps extensions with one set of dumbbells) to save time.

Machines and free weights: a mix of both.

Choose your split:

- **3 days:** full body three times.
- **4 days, upper and lower (the default):** two lower-body days and two upper-body days.
- **4 days, push and pull:** pressing muscles one day, pulling muscles the next, with legs spread across both.

A sample week (machines, upper and lower):

Day	Session
Monday	Lower 1: leg press, leg curl, leg extension, calf raise
Tuesday	Upper 1: chest press, row, shoulder press, pull-down, biceps curl, triceps push-down
Wednesday	Walk or cardio, about 75 minutes
Thursday	Lower 2: back extension, hack squat, hip abduction, ab crunch
Friday	Upper 2: shoulder press, pull-down, incline press, cable row, chest fly, rear-delt fly, lateral raise
Saturday	Walk or cardio, about 75 minutes
Sunday	Rest

Why these exercises

- **Compound lifts do most of the work.** Each day starts with multi-joint lifts such as squats, presses and rows, which train several muscles at once.
- **Single-muscle exercises fill the gaps.** Some muscles get little work from the big lifts, such as the side shoulders, rear shoulders, calves and, on some days, the arms. Lateral raises, rear-delt flies, curls and calf raises make sure every one of the eight muscle groups reaches its weekly target.
- **They don't replace compound lifts.** In a 2023 meta-analysis, adding single-joint exercises to compound ones didn't add measurable whole-muscle growth on average [1]. Here they're used to reach muscles the compound lifts miss, not as a growth shortcut.
- **Machines or free weights, your choice.** In a 2023 meta-analysis of 13 studies, machines and free weights built similar muscle [2]. Machines are easier to take close to failure safely.
- **Supersets save time.** In a 2025 meta-analysis of 19 studies, supersets shortened sessions while gains in strength and muscle size were similar to traditional sets [3]. Opposing-muscle pairs, like the ones in this program, allowed more reps than traditional sets.

Why these sets and reps

- **At least 10 hard sets per muscle a week.** In a 2017 meta-analysis of 15 studies, each added weekly set was linked to more growth, and 10 or more sets produced the largest average effect [4].
- **More helps, but less each time.** A 2026 analysis of 67 studies with 2,058 people found more weekly sets built more muscle, with shrinking returns for each set added [5].

- **How the planner counts.** A set counts in full for the muscles an exercise mainly trains and at half value for muscles that only assist, such as the triceps in a bench press. That matches the model that fit best in the 2026 analysis [5]. The planner then adds sets, up to 5 per exercise, until every major muscle reaches 10, as long as each session stays under about 75 minutes.
- **8 to 12 reps on main lifts, 10 to 15 on single-muscle exercises.** In a 2021 network meta-analysis of 28 studies, heavy, moderate and light loads built similar muscle when sets went close to failure [6]. Moderate reps keep the weights manageable on big lifts; slightly higher reps suit small muscles and joints.
- **Close to failure matters for growth.** A 2024 set of analyses found muscle growth improved as sets ended closer to failure [7].
- **But not all the way.** In a 2024 trial of 18 trained lifters, thigh growth over eight weeks was similar whether sets went to failure or stopped short, and failure caused more fatigue [8]. Ending 1 to 3 reps short gets most of the benefit.

Why this rest

- **2 minutes on main lifts, 1 minute on single-muscle exercises.** A 2024 meta-analysis of 9 studies found a small, uncertain growth benefit for rests longer than 60 seconds, with no clear further gain beyond about 90 seconds [9]. Longer rests let you do more reps on the next set, which is where the benefit comes from.

Why three or four days

- **For growth, total sets matter more than the split.** A 2019 meta-analysis found that with weekly sets matched, training a muscle more often made no meaningful difference to growth [10].
- **Full body or split worked equally well.** In a 2021 trial, 67 untrained young men did either a body-part split or full-body sessions with 16 weekly sets per muscle. Strength and growth were similar [11].
- **So pick the days that fit your week.** Four days keeps each session shorter. Every version trains each muscle at least twice a week.

How it progresses

1. **Start a little light** for the first week while you learn each exercise.
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 the top of its range, the weight goes up 5 lb for upper-body exercises or 10 lb for lower-body ones, and the reps start over at the bottom.
4. **Miss a target?** Repeat the same targets next time.

5. **Stalled?** Today's workout flags it when your reps haven't risen in 3 weeks. If you're recovering well, add a set to that muscle (see "When progress stalls").

Eat for growth

- **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, gains in muscle from extra protein leveled off around that amount [12].
- **Calories:** eat at maintenance or a little above. In a 2022 meta-analysis, lifters eating well below their needs gained less lean mass [13].

Reality check: Most studies lasted weeks to a few months. In the 2026 analysis, the average age was 25 and 79% were men, so the exact set numbers are less certain for older adults and women. Results vary widely between people on the same program.

How sure are we: Strong that more weekly hard sets build more muscle, with shrinking returns. Strong that a wide range of reps builds muscle when sets end close to failure. Moderate on the exact best rest length.

Related guides

- Choosing a split
- Learning a new lift
- Film your form

Related articles

- The strength training dose
- Compound vs. isolation exercises
- Supersets and shorter workouts
- The protein dose

Sources

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