Program guide: strength

Last reviewed: November 10, 2026



Heavy sets of 3 to 6 reps on the main lifts, practiced two to four times a week with long rests. It builds the most strength for the time you spend, and some muscle along the way.

Why it matters: Strength is specific. You get strongest at the lifts you practice, with heavy weights, done often. This program is built around those three facts.

The program at a glance

Setting	Strength program
Strength days	2 or 3 full-body days, or 4 days split upper and lower body
Session length	About 45 to 70 minutes
Main lifts	4 sets of 3 to 6 reps
Extra exercises	2 sets of 8 to 12 reps (core 10 to 15)
Effort	Stop each set with 1 to 3 reps left in the tank
Rest	2½ minutes on main lifts, 1½ minutes on extras
Weekly target	At least 4 hard sets for each big muscle group; most get 8 or more
Cardio	About 150 minutes a week
Total time	About 5 to 6½ hours a week

The workouts

Machines (start here): heavy sets on machines: leg press, hack squat, chest press, shoulder press, rows and pull-downs. No balance or spotter needed.

Free weights: the classic barbell lifts: back squat, bench press, deadlift, Romanian deadlift and overhead press, plus pull-ups and rows.

Machines and free weights: barbell squat, bench press and deadlift as the main lifts, machines for the rest.

Choose your days:

- **2 days:** Day A and Day B, full body.
- **3 days (the default):** Day A, B and C, full body.
- **4 days:** two lower-body days and two upper-body days.

The main lifts: a squat, a hip hinge (pushing your hips straight back, as if closing a drawer behind you), a horizontal press, an overhead press, a row and a pull-down or pull-up. Extras such as lunges, curls, triceps exercises, calves and core get lighter sets.

A sample 3-day week (free weights):

Day	Session
Monday	Back squat, bench press, dumbbell row, curls, core
Tuesday	Walk or cardio, 50 minutes
Wednesday	Deadlift, overhead press, pull-ups, reverse lunges
Thursday	Walk or cardio, 50 minutes
Friday	Goblet squat, incline dumbbell press, barbell row, triceps, calves
Saturday	Walk or cardio, 50 minutes
Sunday	Rest

Why these exercises

- **Practice the lifts you want to get strong at.** Strength gains are closely tied to how you train. In a 2023 meta-analysis, free-weight training raised free-weight strength more than machine training did, while muscle growth was similar with either [1].
- **That's why there are three versions.** Pick the equipment you want to be strong on. Machines are the easiest start; free weights build strength on the barbell lifts.

- **Big, multi-joint lifts first.** Compound lifts train the most muscle for the time. Adding single-joint exercises didn't add measurable whole-muscle growth on average in a 2023 meta-analysis [2]. The program keeps a few for balance and joint health, with fewer sets.
- **A straight-bar deadlift for the hip hinge.** Keeping the bar close, dragging up the front of your legs, trains the hamstrings, glutes and lower back together. In a 2016 study of 20 trained men, the straight bar worked the hamstrings and lower back harder than a hexagonal bar did [9].
- **The dumbbell deadlift is the easier start.** It's the same movement with lighter, more manageable weights held at your sides. Learn it there, then move to the barbell once it feels solid.

Why these sets and reps

- **3 to 6 reps on the main lifts.** In a 2021 network meta-analysis of 28 studies, heavy loads (8 reps or fewer) built more strength than light ones, while muscle growth was similar across loads [3].
- **4 sets each.** A 2026 analysis of 67 studies found more weekly sets built more strength, but the returns shrank faster for strength than for size [4]. Four sets of a main lift, two or three times a week, gives plenty of practice without very long sessions.
- **Stop 1 to 3 reps short of failure.** A 2024 set of analyses found strength gains looked similar across a wide range of effort, while muscle growth improved closer to failure [5]. For strength, there's little to gain from grinding out the last rep.
- **Failure costs recovery.** In a 2017 study of 10 trained men, sets taken to failure on bench press and squat took 24 to 48 hours longer to recover from [6].
- **8 to 12 reps on the extras.** They're there for muscle and balance, not maximum strength, so moderate weights do the job with less wear.

Why this rest

- **2½ minutes on main lifts.** In a 2016 trial of 21 trained men, 3-minute rests raised squat strength 15.2%, compared with 7.6% with 1-minute rests [7].
- **Heavy sets need it.** The fuel your muscles use for short, hard efforts (phosphocreatine) takes several minutes to fully restock [8]. Short rests mean fewer good reps on the next set.

Why this many days

- **More practice, more strength.** In the 2026 analysis, training a muscle more often helped strength, with each added day helping less [4]. Most main lifts appear two or three times a week in every version.

- **The split is about your schedule.** With 4 days, upper and lower body alternate, so each session is shorter and each lift still gets practiced twice.

How it progresses

1. **Learn each lift light.** Spend the first week or two with weights you could lift several more times.
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 6 reps (12 on extras), the weight goes up 5 lb for upper-body lifts or 10 lb for lower-body ones, and the reps start over at the bottom of the range.
4. **Miss a target?** Repeat the same targets next time.

Safety: use a rack with safety arms, or a spotter (a partner ready to help with the bar), on heavy squats and bench presses. **Breathing:** breathe in as you lower the weight, tighten your stomach muscles, then breathe out steadily as you lift (see "Breathing during lifts").

Reality check: Most studies lasted weeks to a few months and tested young adults, most of them men. The rest-period evidence rests largely on one small trial.

How sure are we: Strong that heavier loads build more strength. Moderate that training a lift more often helps strength. Moderate that longer rests help strength, since that rests on few trials.

Related guides

- Learning a new lift
- Film your form
- A 10-minute warm-up

Related articles

- The strength training dose
- How to keep getting stronger
- Training to failure
- How long to rest between sets

Sources

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