Supersets and shorter workouts

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Supersets, pairing exercises back to back, shortened workouts and built similar strength and muscle to standard sets.

Why it matters: Lifting sessions with long rests between every set can run an hour or more. A few changes to how you structure a workout can cut that time without giving up much.

The details: The trade-off is that sessions feel harder.

Go deeper

The big picture: A standard workout finishes all sets of one exercise, resting between each, before moving on. A superset alternates two exercises with little rest between them, so one muscle group recovers while another works.

Three ways to pair:

- **Opposing muscles:** a push and a pull for the same body part, such as a bench press and a row.
- **Same muscles:** two exercises for the same muscle group, such as a bench press and push-ups.
- **Distant body parts:** an upper-body and a lower-body exercise, such as a pull-down and a leg press.

By the numbers:

- A 2025 meta-analysis pooled 19 studies with 313 participants comparing supersets with traditional sets [1].
- Supersets shortened sessions and raised training efficiency, meaning more work per minute.
- Total weight lifted and total reps were similar.
- In longer studies, gains in maximum strength, muscular endurance and muscle size were similar.
- Supersets were more demanding: blood lactate (a sign of how hard the muscles are working), energy cost and perceived effort were all higher.

Pairing matters:

- Opposing-muscle pairs allowed more reps than traditional sets [1].
- Same-muscle pairs reduced the total weight lifted, because the muscle had not recovered between exercises.
- The authors noted that the higher strain of supersets may call for longer recovery between sessions.

Drop sets:

- A drop set takes a set to failure, then lowers the weight and keeps going, often more than once.
- A 2023 meta-analysis included 6 studies with 142 adults aged 19 to 27 [2].
- Muscle growth was similar to traditional sets, not greater. Some drop-set protocols took half to a third of the time.
- Two of the time-saving protocols [2]:
- One set of about 12 reps to failure, then three more drops of 20% in weight each, compared with 3 sets of 12 with 90-second rests.
- One heavy set to failure, then four drops down to a light weight, compared with 3 heavy sets with 3-minute rests.
- These studies measured muscle size, not strength.

Rest-pause sets:

- A rest-pause set takes a set close to failure, pauses about 20 seconds, then does a few more reps, repeating the pause and mini-sets until a target is reached.
- A popular version, sometimes called myo-reps, repeats 20-second pauses until about 20 hard reps are done in total. We found no trial of that exact method.
- In a 2019 trial, 18 trained adults did rest-pause or traditional sets for 6 weeks [5]. Strength gains were similar. The rest-pause group gained more thigh muscle and more reps on the leg press. It was one small study.

Other time savers:

- A 2021 review of time-efficient training recommended building workouts around multi-joint exercises that use both sides at once, including at least one leg press or squat, one upper-body pull and one upper-body push [3].
- It found gains with as few as 4 hard sets per muscle group a week. More sets build more, with shrinking returns per added set [4].
- Loads from about 6 to 15 reps per set worked, and lighter loads of 15 to 40 reps also worked when sets went to failure [3].
- The review advised keeping warm-ups specific to the exercise and stretching only when flexibility is a goal.
- It judged that supersets, drop sets and rest-pause sets can roughly halve training time while keeping volume, and are probably better suited to muscle growth than to maximum strength.

Between the lines: Drop sets and rest-pause sets pack several near-failure efforts into a short time. How close to failure to go is covered in "Training to failure."

Reality check: The drop-set studies tested only young adults. Drop sets and rest-pause sets depend on going to failure, which adds fatigue, and the 2021 review called for more long-term research on these techniques.

How sure are we: Moderate that supersets and drop sets save time without losing muscle growth. Early for rest-pause sets, which rest on very few studies.

Build a shorter workout

1. **Choose 3 to 5 multi-joint exercises.** Cover your legs, an upper-body push and an upper-body pull.
2. **Pair opposing or distant movements.** For example, pair a bench press with a seated row, or an overhead press with a leg press. Do a set of the first, rest briefly, do a set of the second, and repeat.
3. **Avoid same-muscle pairs when you want to lift heavy.** They cut the weight you can handle.
4. **Keep normal rest on your main strength lift.** If maximum strength is your goal, give your heaviest exercise full rest and use supersets for the rest of the session.
5. **Add a drop set or rest-pause set on the last set** of an exercise if you want extra muscle-building work in less time.
6. **Warm up with lighter sets of your first exercise** instead of a long general routine.
7. **Watch your recovery.** Supersets feel harder. If your performance falls from one session to the next, add a rest day.

In Plan my workouts, **Build your own** lets you link exercises into supersets or circuits, or turn an exercise's sets into a drop set.

Sources

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