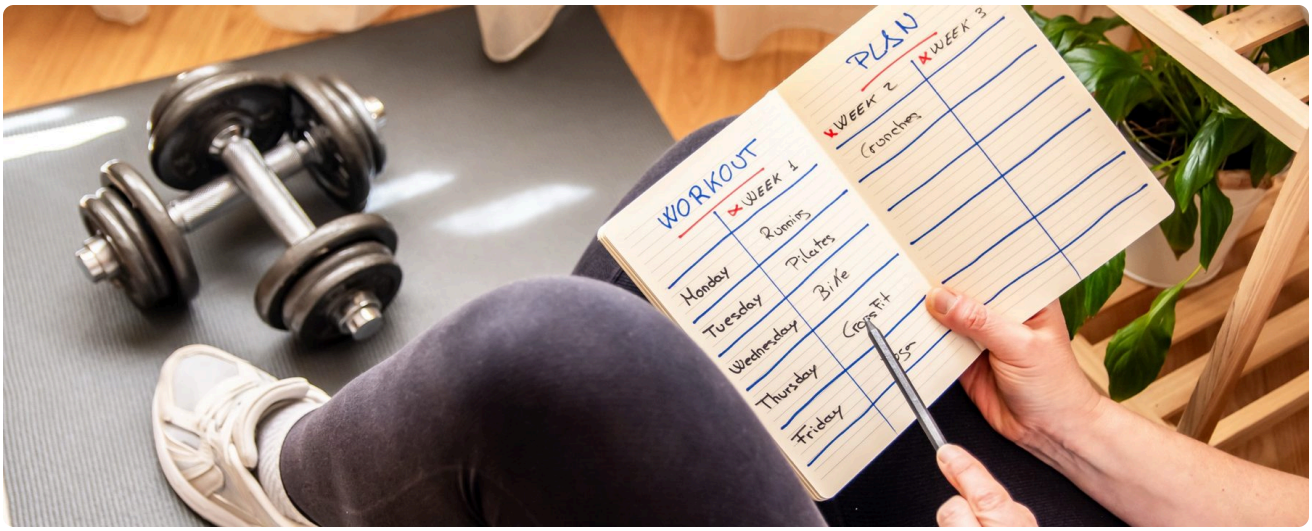
Your first 12 weeks

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In your first 12 weeks, strength climbs fastest, muscle grows early but slowly, and fat loss depends mostly on what you eat.

Why it matters: Expecting a visible change in the mirror within a few weeks can make a plan that is working look like one that is failing. Each kind of result arrives on its own schedule.

The details: Knowing the timeline helps you judge your progress fairly.

Go deeper

The big picture: Your body adapts to training in a rough order. Coordination and strength come first, fitness improves within weeks, muscle size builds steadily, and fat loss follows your eating more than your training.

Strength comes first:

- A classic 1979 study found that most of the strength gained in the first weeks came from the nervous system learning to use muscle better. Muscle growth played a bigger part later [1].
- In a 2007 study, 7 young adults did leg extensions three times a week. Their maximum strength rose 39% in 35 days [2].
- Early jumps in the weights you lift are real progress, even before your muscles look different.

Muscle growth starts early but is small:

- In the same 2007 study, thigh muscle size rose 3.5% to 5% by day 20 and 6.5% to 7.4% by day 35 [2].
- A 2016 study of 10 young men measured muscle fibers over 10 weeks. Fiber size increased measurably only by week 10. In the first weeks, when muscle damage from the new exercise was greatest, the rise in muscle protein building was not linked to growth [3].
- A few percent more muscle is real but hard to spot in a mirror in the first month or two.

Results vary widely:

- In a 2005 study, 585 adults followed the same 12-week arm program [4].
- Changes in muscle size ranged from a 2% loss to a 59% gain, and strength gains from 0% to 250%.
- Women gained more strength relative to where they started. Men gained slightly more muscle size.

Fitness improves within weeks, with enough sessions:

- In a 2017 trial, 78 healthy adults did 1 to 5 one-hour endurance sessions a week for six weeks [5].
- At four or five sessions a week, everyone improved. At one session a week, 69% showed no measurable improvement.
- Those who hadn't improved then added two sessions a week for six more weeks, and all of them improved.

Fat loss follows your eating:

- Across 149 studies in adults with overweight or obesity, exercise programs on their own produced 3.3 to 7.7 lb (1.5 to 3.5 kg) of weight loss [6].
- Lifting combined with eating fewer calories removed about 11.7 lb (5.3 kg) of fat on average, while lean mass (everything except fat: mostly muscle, bone and water) held steady [7].
- Lifting without a diet added a little lean mass and removed a little fat. In that case, the scale can barely move even though your body is changing [7].

You can't choose where fat comes off:

- Many people believe fat comes off in a set order, such as from the head down, or from the body part they exercise most. We found no research showing a fixed order.
- In a 2011 trial, 24 adults did abdominal exercises five days a week for 6 weeks. Their waist and belly fat did not change compared with people who didn't do the exercises [8].
- A 2022 meta-analysis pooled 13 studies that trained one arm or leg and compared it with the untrained side. Fat near the trained limb did not drop more than fat near the untrained one [9].
- Fat loss comes from your overall calorie balance, and it is drawn from across the body.

Between the lines: In the first 12 weeks, your training log and tape measure tell you more than the scale or the mirror.

Reality check: Most of these studies were small and tested young adults. Your own rate of progress may be faster or slower.

How sure are we: Strong that strength rises fastest early and that results vary widely between people. Strong that training one area does not target fat there. Moderate on the exact timing of early muscle growth, since those studies were small.

Track your first 12 weeks

1. **Weeks 1 to 4: focus on showing up and learning the exercises.** Expect the weights you lift to rise quickly. That's your nervous system learning.
2. **Weeks 5 to 8: watch your training log.** Weights and reps should keep creeping up. Cardio at the same pace should start to feel easier.
3. **Weeks 9 to 12: compare against week 1.** Look at your strength, waist measurement and a timed walk or ride over the same route.
4. **Measure the right things.** Log every session (**Today's workout** in Plan my workouts keeps the record for you), check your waist once a month, and use a weekly average for body weight rather than daily readings.
5. **If something isn't moving, raise the dose before you switch plans.** Add a set or a session, as in the 2017 trial. Check your eating if fat loss is the goal.
6. **Compare yourself with yourself.** Results in the same program ranged from almost nothing to dramatic. Your own trend is the one that counts.

Sources

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