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GUIDE

Strength Training for Beginners

Your First 12 Weeks in the Gym

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Strength Training for Beginners

Your First 12 Weeks in the Gym

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This guide is for educational purposes only and is not medical advice. It does not diagnose, treat or replace care from a qualified health professional. Talk to your doctor before you change any treatment, medication or care plan, and get help promptly for any symptom that worries you.

INSIDE THIS GUIDE

Contents

	How to Use This Guide	4
	Before You Begin: Health Check and Gym Safety	6
CHAPTER 1	**How Strength Training Works**	10
CHAPTER 2	**Your First Visit: Finding Your Way Around the Gym**	14
CHAPTER 3	**Warm-Up and Technique Basics**	18
CHAPTER 4	**The Squat Pattern: Leg Press, Goblet Squat and Back Squat**	21
CHAPTER 5	**The Hinge Pattern: Deadlifts and Hip Thrusts**	25
CHAPTER 6	**The Push: Presses for Chest and Shoulders**	29
CHAPTER 7	**The Pull: Rows and Pulldowns**	33
CHAPTER 8	**Carries, Core and Extras**	36
CHAPTER 9	**Progressive Overload: How to Get Stronger Every Week**	39
CHAPTER 10	**Your 12-Week Program and Beyond**	43
CHAPTER 11	**Recovery and Food**	46

How to Use This Guide

Walking into a gym for the first time can feel like arriving at a party where everyone else knows the rules. This guide gives you those rules and a plan. You will learn how strength training works, how to find your way around the equipment, how to perform the main lifts safely with machines, dumbbells and barbells, and how to add weight steadily so that you keep getting stronger. Then you will follow a simple 12-week program, three short sessions a week, logging every set.

It suits complete beginners and people returning after years away, of any age and body size. Nothing here requires you to be fit already; the program starts light on purpose.

How the guide is organized

- **Before You Begin** covers the health check and the safety rules of a gym. Read it first.
- **Chapters 1 to 3** explain how strength training works, give you a tour of the gym and teach the warm-up and the technique basics shared by every lift.
- **Chapters 4 to 8** describe the exercises, grouped by movement pattern: squat, hinge, push, pull, then carries, core and smaller extras.
- **Chapter 9** shows you how to choose weights and progress them. **Chapter 10** explains the 12-week program and what comes after it. **Chapter 11** covers recovery and food, including protein.

The companion **Strength Training Program** workbook holds the 12-week plan, a workout log for every session and cue cards for the main lifts. Read Before You Begin and Chapters 1 to 3 before your first session, skim Chapters 4 to 8, then look up each exercise as it appears in the program.

How the exercise descriptions work

There are no photos in this guide, so every lift is described in words, in the same order:

- **Set up:** how to adjust the equipment and position your body before the first repetition.
- **Do it:** what moves, in what order, and how far.
- **Cues:** two or three short phrases to say to yourself during the set.
- **Watch for:** the usual mistakes and how to fix them.
- **Swap:** what to use instead if the equipment is busy or the lift does not suit you.

Read the description before you go to the gym, then again at the station. Do your first sets with a deliberately light weight, and if you can, prop your phone up to film one set from the side (check your gym's filming rules, and keep other people out of the shot) to compare what you see with the words.

What you need

- [ ] A gym membership. Any gym with adjustable dumbbells, a few cable or plate-loaded machines, a bench and ideally a squat rack covers the whole program.
- [ ] Comfortable clothes you can move in, and closed shoes with a flat, firm sole (running shoes with very soft, thick heels can feel unstable for squats and deadlifts)
- [ ] A water bottle and a small towel
- [ ] The companion workbook and a pen, or a notes app if you prefer

> TIP
>
> **About the examples**
>
> The people in the example boxes are composites written to show the method in action. They are not real customers, and their numbers are illustrations, not promises of what you will lift.

CHAPTER 1

How Strength Training Works

01

You do not get stronger during a workout. A workout is a signal; you get stronger in the days afterward, as your body adapts to the demand you placed on it. Strength training is the craft of sending that signal clearly and repeatedly, then making it a little stronger each time. Once you understand the cycle, every choice in the program makes sense.

The adaptation cycle

1. **Challenge.** You lift a load that is hard for you, for several sets.
2. **Recover.** Over the next one to three days, with food and sleep, your body repairs and adapts.
3. **Adapt.** You come back slightly more capable than before.
4. **Progress.** You add a repetition or a little weight, so the challenge keeps pace with your new ability.

Skip step 4 and you stop improving. Skip step 2, by training the same muscles hard every day without enough food or sleep, and you get tired and sore rather than strong. The program alternates two full-body workouts with rest days in between to get the balance right.

Why beginners get stronger so fast

In your first weeks, much of your strength gain comes from your nervous system rather than your muscles. You learn the movement, your coordination improves and your brain becomes better at switching on more of the muscle you already have. That is why weights often feel

easier from one session to the next at the start, well before your muscles have grown. Over the following weeks and months, muscle growth makes a growing contribution, and progress slows to a steadier pace. Both are normal stages, not signs that something has gone wrong.

THE SCIENCE

What the research supports

Exercise scientists describe a principle of progressive overload: to keep adapting, the demand on the muscle has to increase over time, through more weight, more repetitions or more sets. Research also shows that muscles can grow across a wide range of repetitions, from heavy sets of about 5 to light sets of 20 or more, provided the sets are taken reasonably close to failure. Strength itself, the ability to lift heavy loads, improves most with heavier loads in lower repetition ranges. That is why the program starts with moderate weights for learning and gradually moves to heavier, lower-repetition work.

The language of the gym

- **Repetition (rep):** one complete movement, for example lowering into a squat and standing up.
- **Set:** a group of repetitions done without resting, for example 10 squats.
- **Sets x reps:** “3 x 10” means three sets of ten repetitions.
- **Rest:** the pause between sets. Bigger lifts need longer rests, about 2 to 3 minutes; smaller exercises need about 1 to 2.
- **Load:** the weight you lift.
- **Reps in reserve (RIR):** how many more good repetitions you could have done at the end of a set. Stopping with 2 in reserve means you could have done 2 more with good form. This is how you will judge effort throughout the program.
- **Range of motion:** how far you move. Use the full range you can control.

How much you need

The World Health Organization recommends muscle-strengthening activities that work all the major muscle groups on at least two days a week for adults, alongside regular aerobic activity. Two full-body sessions a week is enough for good progress as a beginner; three

makes progress a little faster and leaves room for missed sessions. The program uses three, with a two-day option.

What to expect in 12 weeks, honestly

- **Strength:** most beginners lift noticeably more within a few weeks, and keep adding weight to the main lifts for months. How much varies with age, sex, sleep, food, stress, genetics and consistency.
- **Muscle:** changes in size take longer to see, usually several weeks to a few months, and are easier to measure with a tape or with how clothes fit than in a mirror.
- **Body weight:** strength training alone may not change your weight much. Muscle is denser than fat, and food matters more for weight change (Chapter 11).
- **Everyday life:** carrying shopping, climbing stairs and getting up from the floor often feel easier early on.
- **Health:** regular strength training is linked with better blood sugar control, stronger bones, better mobility as you age and improved mood.

Three myths to drop

- **"Lifting will make me bulky."** Building large muscles takes years of deliberate training and eating, and is far harder for most women, who have much less testosterone than men. You will not wake up bulky by accident.
- **"Light weights for toning, heavy weights for size."** "Toned" means some muscle and lower body fat. You build the muscle with challenging sets, whatever the weight; body fat depends mostly on food.
- **"I am too old to start."** Adults in their seventies and eighties gain strength with resistance training. Starting later means starting lighter, not staying away.

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WORKBOOK

Strength Training Program

12-Week Gym Plan, Workout Logs and Exercise Cue Cards

COMPANION TO STRENGTH TRAINING FOR BEGINNERS

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INSIDE THIS WORKBOOK

Contents

	How to Use This Program	4
	Before You Begin	6
PART 1	**The 12-Week Logs**	7
PART 2	**Week 12 Review**	14
PART 3	**Exercise Cue Cards**	16

Before You Begin

- [ ] Read Before You Begin in the guide, and see your doctor first if any screening question applies
- [ ] Read Chapters 1 to 3 of the guide (how training works, the gym tour, the warm-up and technique basics)
- [ ] Do the gym tour from Chapter 2 and fill in your machine settings below
- [ ] Choose three training days and times:

_____

- [ ] Decide where you will keep this workbook and a pen, or how you will photograph it

My machine settings

Machine or station	Seat	Pads or other settings	Notes
Leg press			
Chest press			
Lat pulldown			
Seated cable row			
Leg curl			
Adjustable bench (angle for shoulder press)			
Squat rack (hook and safety arm holes)			