
A **Men'sHealth**® Training Guide

THE BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO STRENGTH TRAINING

Workouts and techniques to help you get strong in 12 weeks

BY LOU SCHULER

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The information given here is designed to help you make informed decisions about your health.
It is not intended as a substitute for any treatment that may have been prescribed by your doctor.
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WHAT IS SUCCESSFUL STRENGTH TRAINING?



»—————→ The usual play when someone like me writes a program for someone like you—someone who’s just getting started, or returning after a layoff—is to promise you all kinds of wonderful things. Biceps! Abs! A hummingbird’s metabolism with a bison’s bone density!

A lifetime of lifting, and a quarter-century of writing about it, has taught me never to promise any specific outcome to any specific routine. The range of potential responses is as diverse as humanity itself. Some lifters put on muscle faster than others. Some get really, really strong. With some the physical transformation toward a lean, athletic body seems sudden and dramatic, and with others it’s a slower process. Only until you commit yourself to a serious strength-training program will you see how your body responds and take your training to another dimension.

Before I show you that program, and explain in detail how to get the most out of it, we need to define a key term.

THE B WORD

What is a “beginner”? If we were talking about almost any other skill, it would be easy to say who’s a novice and who isn’t.

For example, if you’re a 15-year-old who’s about to take his first driving lesson, of course you’re a beginner. Even if you’ve operated a lawn tractor, or done a few laps in a go-kart, you

understand that operating a car on public streets involves a set of skills you don’t yet have, and that you need to learn in a systematic way. (And if you’re a parent, you’re *acutely* aware of just how much your entry-level driver doesn’t know.)

Not so with strength training. Almost everybody—male or female, young or old, athletic or

not—has done some kind of muscle-building exercise. Maybe it was a few pushups here or there, or some squats and bench presses in a high school gym class. Or you bought a Total Gym or Bowflex and used it at home just long enough to see some results...until you got so bored with doing the same things on the same piece of

equipment that you felt like a prisoner every time you stepped into your spare bedroom or wherever you kept it. You may or may not consider yourself a “beginner,” but you’ll accept the label if the program teaches you what you need to know and helps you reach your goals.

But let’s say you were once serious about your workouts—you were in the military, or trained for a sport, or belonged to a gym, or owned some heavy-duty equipment and made good use of it. You did this for months or even years, you got results, and now you want to get there again. “Beginner” is probably the last word you’d use to describe yourself, and if anyone else used it, you’d take it as an insult.

Fortunately, there’s a better word. When researchers recruit subjects for a strength-training study, they generally divide them into two categories: “trained” lifters are those who’ve been doing it regularly, and the “untrained” are those who haven’t worked out for at least six months. I would take it a step further: Even if you’ve worked out regularly, but haven’t found a program you like, or learned key exercises like squats and deadlifts, or seen a significant difference in the size, strength, or appearance of your muscles, I would also describe you as untrained. Now it’s time to fix that.

DEFINING SUCCESS

To get the most out of a strength-training program, it helps to understand what each of those words means.

Strength, technically, is the amount of force your body can produce. It’s obviously context-specific. We know from decades of research that the strongest people live the longest, with the fewest disabilities. And yet, in everyday life, physical strength is an abstraction most of the time. How much strength do you need to get up from a chair and walk to your car? The only forces resisting you are gravity and maybe a mild breeze.

But imagine that you’re in Home Depot and you need to pick up a dozen 40-pound bags of mulch. Now you have a whole series of strength challenges. First you have to get the bags up off the pallet and onto your cart. Then you have to get the bags from the cart into your vehicle (after paying for them, we hope). Then you have to get them from your vehicle to wherever they need to go.

The actions are surprisingly complex: You’re bending down to lift something from the floor, straightening your body, turning, putting it down again, and repeating it 11 more times. With each repetition, you’re producing force from almost every major muscle in your body, either to lift the bag, to help you stay upright, or to protect potentially vulnerable areas like your lower back. The more strength you have, the easier it will be not just to lift each bag, but to repeat the action without having to stop and rest.

Training is the process you use to improve strength and to achieve all your other goals—

to get leaner, faster, more muscular, better skilled, or better conditioned than you are now.

A *program* is the blueprint for training; a series of workouts designed to help you get from where you are now to where you want to be.

Your success in a strength-training program comes from *progressive resistance*. You give your muscles incrementally more challenging tasks, and they respond by increasing their strength, size, and ability to perform the exercises in the program.

By the end of this 12-week program you should have a *base of strength*, or be well on your way to developing one. That base allows you to achieve everything you want from your workouts. Bigger muscles? There’s a direct line from strength to size. You want to get leaner? With a stronger body, you can train with heavier loads, which allows you to do more work in the same amount of time. You just want to feel better? The stronger you are, the easier it is to get from Point A to Point B. Even with simple movements like walking and climbing stairs, you’ll generate more force with each stride, and generate it faster. That’s why studies show that people who lift will typically become more physically active outside the gym than they were before. It’s just easier to get up and move around, and the easier it is, the more likely you are to do it.

I’m confident those benefits are available to anyone who’s willing to put in the work.

HOW THE PROGRAM WORKS



- »»—————▶ The 12-week program is divided into three four-week stages, each of which builds on the one that preceded it. Within each stage you'll alternate between two workouts, which I have very cleverly named Workout 1 and Workout 2. Both are total-body workouts, which means you'll work all your major muscles each time you lift.

Ideally, you'll hit the weights three times a week, with at least 48 hours in between workouts. This allows your body time to recover, which is when your muscles actually get bigger and stronger. You can do anything you want on the non-lifting days, and the program will work better if you do something active. You just have to make sure the other things you do aren't so fatiguing that they hinder your recovery from the strength workouts.

Here's what a typical Monday-Wednesday-Friday workout schedule will look like for any given stage:

WEEK	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
1	Workout A	Off	Workout B	Off	Workout A	Off	Off
2	Workout B	Off	Workout A	Off	Workout B	Off	Off
3	Workout A	Off	Workout B	Off	Workout A	Off	Off
4	Workout B	Off	Workout A	Off	Workout B	Off	Off

As you can see, if you stick to this schedule, you'll do Workout A and Workout B six times each—12 total workouts—in four weeks. Then you can go directly to the next stage at the start of the fifth week, or take a few days off if you feel your body can use the extra recovery time.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

The workouts require basic equipment you'll find in any bare-bones commercial health club:

- Full range of dumbbells, including weights that seem much heavier than anything you'd consider lifting right now
- Cable machine with high, low, and in-between settings for the pulley, along with all the usual attachments—stirrup handles, long bar, triangle bar, rope (if you don't know what those things are, you'll see all of them in the exercise photos that follow)
- Barbell and weight plates
- Bench, boxes, and steps
- Mini bands (which you may need to purchase for a few dollars per band)

You can do the workouts in a home gym if you have all or most of this equipment. But if you're just starting out, don't currently have access to a fitness center, and don't have any of this equipment at home, I highly recommend signing up for a short-term, low-cost membership—even if your previous gym experiences have been suboptimal. I say that for four reasons:

- It's *much* cheaper to pay a nominal fee—most cities and suburbs will have at least one gym you can join for \$10 to \$30 a month—than to invest a few hundred dollars on free weights.
- It gives you a chance to try out a lot of equipment to see what you like best and will use most.

The exercises in this program don't require any machines beyond a cable station, but if you try some, you may decide you prefer them to free weights. Or you may decide you really like warming up or doing cardio workouts on a treadmill, stationary bike, or rowing machine.

- An especially well-equipped gym has a lot of stuff to make your workouts more interesting, challenging, and productive: sleds for pushing and pulling, a turf track for sprints and agility drills, kettlebells, ropes, and bands. You'll also be in a room with people who're serious about training, and a lot of us feel more motivated in that milieu.
- Then there's the safety factor. If you're not sure you're doing an exercise correctly, it's hard to troubleshoot on your own. But in a commercial gym there's usually a trainer you can ask, and if you become a regular, the weight-room veterans will also be willing to help.

WORKOUT STRUCTURE

Each workout has three parts

Warmup

Your warmup can be as simple or complex as you want to make it. The goal is to make sure your muscles and joints are ready to be trained. Your body should move smoothly, with a full range of motion in your shoulders, hips, knees, and ankles. You should also be *warmed up*, literally. A small rise in your temperature helps you move more fluidly. Finally,

you want a bit of adrenaline flowing. In addition to getting you amped up for the workout, it helps open your blood vessels, allowing them to transport more oxygen and nutrients to your muscles.

Core training

While the warmup mainly emphasizes *mobility*—moving better—the core exercises train *stability*. That's the ability of the muscles in your hips and torso to keep your lower back in a safe position, and to maintain enough stiffness to support increasingly heavy lifts.

Strength training

Most of your workout will focus on the six strength exercises, which I've divided into two categories:

- **PRIMARY STRENGTH EXERCISES.** You'll do one for your lower body and two for your upper body, with two major goals: to get stronger in the basic movement patterns, which I'll describe in the next section, and to improve your form in the most important exercises within those movement patterns.
- **COMPLEMENTARY STRENGTH EXERCISES.** Again, you'll do one for your lower body and two for your upper body, this time with the goal of activating a lot of muscles and accumulating fatigue. You should also get stronger in these exercises from workout to workout, in part because your technique will improve and in part because you're actually stronger.

MOVEMENT PATTERNS

A human body is capable of magnificent feats of athleticism—running, jumping, climbing, swimming, throwing, grappling. While they all evolved from the necessities of survival, like hunting for food or escaping predators, today we use them mostly for exercise and sports. Unlike our ancient ancestors, we have the luxuries of time and resources to break these movements down into their component parts, and to build strength in them to improve performance. The following movement patterns are perfect for that, since they work the body's major muscles.

Squat

You use the movement every day when you get up and down from a chair. In sports, the squat is an established way to improve sprinting and jumping performance. The exercise builds all the major muscles in your lower body, especially those in your thighs (quadriceps and hamstrings) and hips (gluteals). The muscles in your core (abdominals and lower back) work hard to keep you upright and support your lower back. And various upper-body muscles get involved to support the weight you're lifting.

Hip Hinge

It's a simple movement—bending forward at the hips, and

then straightening your body—that's easy to mess up. In the gym we use it in exercises like the deadlift and glute bridge. We do those exercises to build the posterior-chain muscles, which include the hamstrings, glutes, lower back, and trapezius. The deadlift also improves total-body strength, starting with the grip strength you need to pull heavy weights off the floor, strength in your shoulders and upper back to support those weights, and strength in your lower back to do all this safely.

Upper-Body Push

These exercises—pushups, bench presses, shoulder presses—are among the most popular and straightforward. They work the chest, shoulder, and triceps muscles, and help improve upper-body strength used in punching, grappling, and throwing.

Upper-Body Pull

Your biggest upper-back muscles, the lats and trapezius, are the prime movers in pulling exercises, which include rows, lat pull-downs, and pullups and chinups. You use them outside the weight room in rowing, swimming, and climbing. Those big, complex muscles get an assist from your relatively simple biceps and forearms.

Lunge and Stepup

The muscles are the same as those used in a squat, but the actions come closer to the

real-life mechanics of walking, running, climbing, and leaping forward.

Carry

A few years ago I wouldn't have counted loaded carries among the key movement patterns. I thought they were only for strongman competitors, whose sport requires them to lift and carry heavy things for distance and speed. But now I use them in my own workouts, and include them here, because they do such a great job of tying together so many of the qualities we try to develop in the weight room. Like deadlifts, carries require you to lift something heavy off the floor and hold it. Walking with one or more heavy objects in your hands challenges all the stabilizing muscles in your shoulders, core, and hips, and because you're moving, you also work on balance and coordination.

WEIGHT SELECTION

There is no formula. It's all trial and error. All of us, no matter how experienced, simply have to guess where to begin when we do an exercise for the first time. My advice: When you guess, *guess light*. If you start the set and realize it's not enough weight, consider it a warm-up set. Choose a heavier weight and call that your first set.

On the following pages I'll show you an example of how it might work on a specific exercise.



STAGE



1

EXERCISES / SETS / REPS

»»—————→ When I started lifting weights as a teenager, I would've been confused by the idea of a structured workout program. My older brother and I just did all the exercises we knew, and we did them in whatever way made sense at the time. I suppose there were some benefits to winging it for all those years. I know I got stronger than I would have without lifting; as a high school football player, I went from possibly the weakest guy on my team to somewhere near the middle by my senior year. I also saw my muscular endurance improve in pushups, pullups, and situps. And while I never got much faster, my ability to repeatedly run at the same speed improved dramatically.

What I *didn't* do was build a base of strength. I finally got around to focusing on squats and deadlifts in my late 30s and early 40s. My body responded so fast, and changed so noticeably, that I now share the frankly embarrassing story of my wasted years as a cautionary tale. The straightest path to the results you want from strength training begins with strength. And to build strength, you need a plan. Following a plan—even if it involves a bit of a learning curve, and *especially* if it takes you outside your comfort zone—will ensure you give yourself the best chance to increase strength and muscle mass as quickly and efficiently as your time, effort, and genes allow.

With that out of the way, let's talk about the specifics of the program. Here's how to read each workout, using Workout 1 in Stage 1 on page 12 as an example:

■ **When there's a number** and a letter (1A, 1B), you do those exercises as *alternating sets*. So with the core training exercises, you do the plank (1A) for as long as you can hold it, up to 60 seconds. Then you do the side plank (1B), working both sides. Then you do the plank (1A) again.

When you see a number by itself with no letter, it means you do all the sets of that exercise, with whatever amount of rest you need in between, and then move on to the next exercise or combination of exercises.

Important point: You don't *have* to alternate the lettered exercises. Sometimes the gym is too busy to allow it. Sometimes it's too inconvenient. And sometimes you just don't like to train that way. All that's fine. I like the efficiency of alternating two or three exercises, allowing the muscles you use in one exercise to recover while you do something else. But it's still *your* workout, and you have to do what works best for you.

The next thing you'll notice is that repetitions ("reps" for

short) are expressed two different ways: "12-10-8" for the primary exercises, and "10-12" for the complementary exercises. The 12-10-8 configuration means you'll increase the weight on each set, since you can use heavier weights if you do fewer reps. Your goal over the six workouts in Stage 1 is to increase the weights you use on each of those sets from one workout to the next.

Say you're doing the sumo deadlift in Workout 1, and you do your first set with 25 pounds. Even though the exercise takes some getting used to if you haven't done it before, most guys won't be challenged by that weight. So you perform all 12 reps, and increase the weight to 35 pounds for the next set. That feels a little harder, but you still get all 10 reps. Then you go up to 40 pounds for the third and final set, and even though you get all 8 reps, it's starting to feel like exercise. That's great! The chart below demonstrates how your progression might go in subsequent workouts:

■ **As you can see**, the third time you did sumo deadlift, you couldn't get all the reps in the final sets. So you used the same weights the fourth time through Workout 1, but improved your performance by getting more reps. That's why you increased the weights for all your sets in the fifth workout.

For the complementary exercises, you can either increase the weight for the second set, or use the same weight. You still want to increase weights from workout to workout, but only as much as you need to feel fatigue in your muscles—the sense that you could do maybe one more rep if you really pushed it, but not any more than that.

On the following workout charts, track your progress in the empty boxes—there's a column for each time you complete the workout. Record the weight and number of reps you achieved in each exercise, and refer to it the next time you go through the workout.

WORKOUT	WEIGHT USED / REPS COMPLETED		
First Workout	25/12	35/10	40/8
Second Workout	35/12	40/10	45/8
Third Workout	40/12	45/9	50/6
Fourth Workout	40/12	45/10	50/8
Fifth Workout	45/12	50/9	55/5
Sixth Workout	45/12	50/10	55/7

WORKOUT ONE

EXERCISE	SETS	REPS	TIME THROUGH THE WORKOUT					
			1ST	2ND	3RD	4TH	5TH	6TH
CORE TRAINING								
1A Plank	2	30-60^ / 30-60^						
1B Side Plank	1*	20-30^						
PRIMARY STRENGTH EXERCISES								
2 Dumbbell or Kettlebell Sumo Deadlift	3	12 / 10 / 8						
3A Dumbbell Bench Press	3	12 / 10 / 8						
3B Dumbbell Standing One-Arm Row	3*	12 / 10 / 8						
COMPLEMENTARY STRENGTH EXERCISES								
4A Stepup	2*	10-12 / 10-12						
4B Pushup Variation	2	10-12 / 10-12						
4C Kneeling Lat Pulldown	2	10-12 / 10-12						

* EACH SIDE / [^] SECONDS



CORE TRAINING



1A
Plank



1B
Side Plank

PRIMARY STRENGTH EXERCISES



2
Dumbbell or Kettlebell
Sumo Deadlift



3A
Dumbbell Bench Press



3B
Dumbbell Standing
One-Arm Row

COMPLEMENTARY STRENGTH EXERCISES



4A
Stepup



4B
Pushup Variation



4C
Kneeling Lat Pulldown

*See page 28 for a tutorial on how to do each exercise, as well as any variations.

WORKOUT TWO

EXERCISE	SETS	REPS	TIME THROUGH THE WORKOUT					
			1ST	2ND	3RD	4TH	5TH	6TH

CORE TRAINING

1A Curlup	2	30-60^# / 30-60^#						
1B Bird Dog	1	Up to 60^						

PRIMARY STRENGTH EXERCISES

2 Goblet Squat	3	12 / 10 / 8						
3A Dumbbell Shoulder Press	3	12 / 10 / 8						
3B Inverted Row	3	12 / 10 / 8						

COMPLEMENTARY STRENGTH EXERCISES

4A Half-Kneeling One-Arm Cable Row	2*	10-12 / 10-12						
4B Half-Kneeling One-Arm Cable Chest Press	2*	10-12 / 10-12						
4C Farmer's Carry	2	30 steps / 30 steps						

* EACH SIDE / ^ SECONDS / # HOLD 10 SECONDS ON EACH CURLUP



CORE TRAINING



1A
Curlup



1B
Bird Dog



PRIMARY STRENGTH EXERCISES



2
Goblet Squat



3A
Dumbbell Shoulder Press



3B
Inverted Row

COMPLEMENTARY STRENGTH EXERCISES



4A
Half-Kneeling One-Arm
Cable Row



4B
Half-Kneeling One-Arm
Cable Chest Press



4C
Farmer's Carry

*See page 28 for a tutorial on how to do each exercise, as well as any variations.



STAGE



2

EXERCISES / SETS / REPS

»» —————> In Stage 2 you'll make two kinds of progression from Stage 1. The exercises are somewhat more challenging, and the sets and reps for some of them are a *lot* more challenging. In each workout, you'll see 9-7-5-5 reps for one or two exercises. It works like this:

■ **FIRST SET**

9 reps with a relatively light weight

■ **SECOND SET**

7 reps with a heavier weight

■ **THIRD SET**

5 reps with an even heavier weight

■ **FOURTH SET**

5 reps with the same weight you used in the third set, if it's challenging enough, or a slightly heavier weight if you think you need more

As with the primary strength exercises in Stage 1, you want to increase the weight from workout to workout when you can. But if you don't get all the reps in one workout, use the same weights the next time, with the goal of getting more reps.

For one or two of the primary strength exercises, you'll do 3 sets of 8 reps. You can use the same weight on all three sets, as long as the weight you select makes each set challenging. Again, you want to increase the weight from workout to workout, or, in the case of the inverted row (a body-weight exercise), you want to make it a little harder each time by lowering the bar or moving your feet farther away from the bar.

WORKOUT ONE

EXERCISE	SETS	REPS	TIME THROUGH THE WORKOUT					
			1ST	2ND	3RD	4TH	5TH	6TH

CORE TRAINING

1 Long-Lever Pushup Hold 2 30-60[^] / 30-60[^]

PRIMARY STRENGTH EXERCISES

2 Dumbbell or Barbell Romanian Deadlift 4 9 / 7 / 5 / 5

3A Dumbbell Alternating Shoulder Press 3* 8 / 8 / 8

3B Inverted Row 3 8 / 8 / 8

COMPLEMENTARY STRENGTH EXERCISES

4A Dumbbell or Kettlebell One-Arm Overhead Carry 2* 30 steps / 30 steps

4B Pushup Variation 2 12 / 12

4C Half-kneeling One-Arm Lat Pulldown 2* 12 / 12

* EACH SIDE / ^ SECONDS



CORE TRAINING



1
Long-Lever Pushup Hold

PRIMARY STRENGTH EXERCISES



2
Dumbbell or Barbell
Romanian Deadlift



3A
Dumbbell Alternating
Shoulder Press



3B
Inverted Row

COMPLEMENTARY STRENGTH EXERCISES



4A
Dumbbell or Kettlebell
One-Arm Overhead Carry



4B
Pushup Variation



4C
Half-Kneeling One-Arm
Lat Pulldown

*See page 28 for a tutorial on how to do each exercise, as well as any variations.

STAGE
2

WORKOUT TWO

EXERCISE	SETS	REPS	TIME THROUGH THE WORKOUT					
			1ST	2ND	3RD	4TH	5TH	6TH

CORE TRAINING

1 Pallof Press 2 30-60^# / 30-60^#

PRIMARY STRENGTH EXERCISES

2A Dumbbell Bench Press 4 9 / 7 / 5 / 5

2B Dumbbell One-Arm Row, Hand Supported 4* 9 / 7 / 5 / 5

3 Reverse Lunge 3* 8 / 8 / 8

COMPLEMENTARY STRENGTH EXERCISES

4A Face Pull 2 12 / 12

4B Standing One-Arm Cable Chest Press 2* 12 / 12

4C Glute Bridge with Mini Band 2 30-60^# / 30-60^#

* EACH SIDE / ^ SECONDS / # HOLD 10 SECONDS ON EACH REP



CORE TRAINING



1
Pallof Press

PRIMARY STRENGTH EXERCISES



2A
Dumbbell Bench Press



2B
Dumbbell One-Arm
Row, Hand Supported



3
Reverse Lunge

COMPLEMENTARY STRENGTH EXERCISES



4A
Face Pull

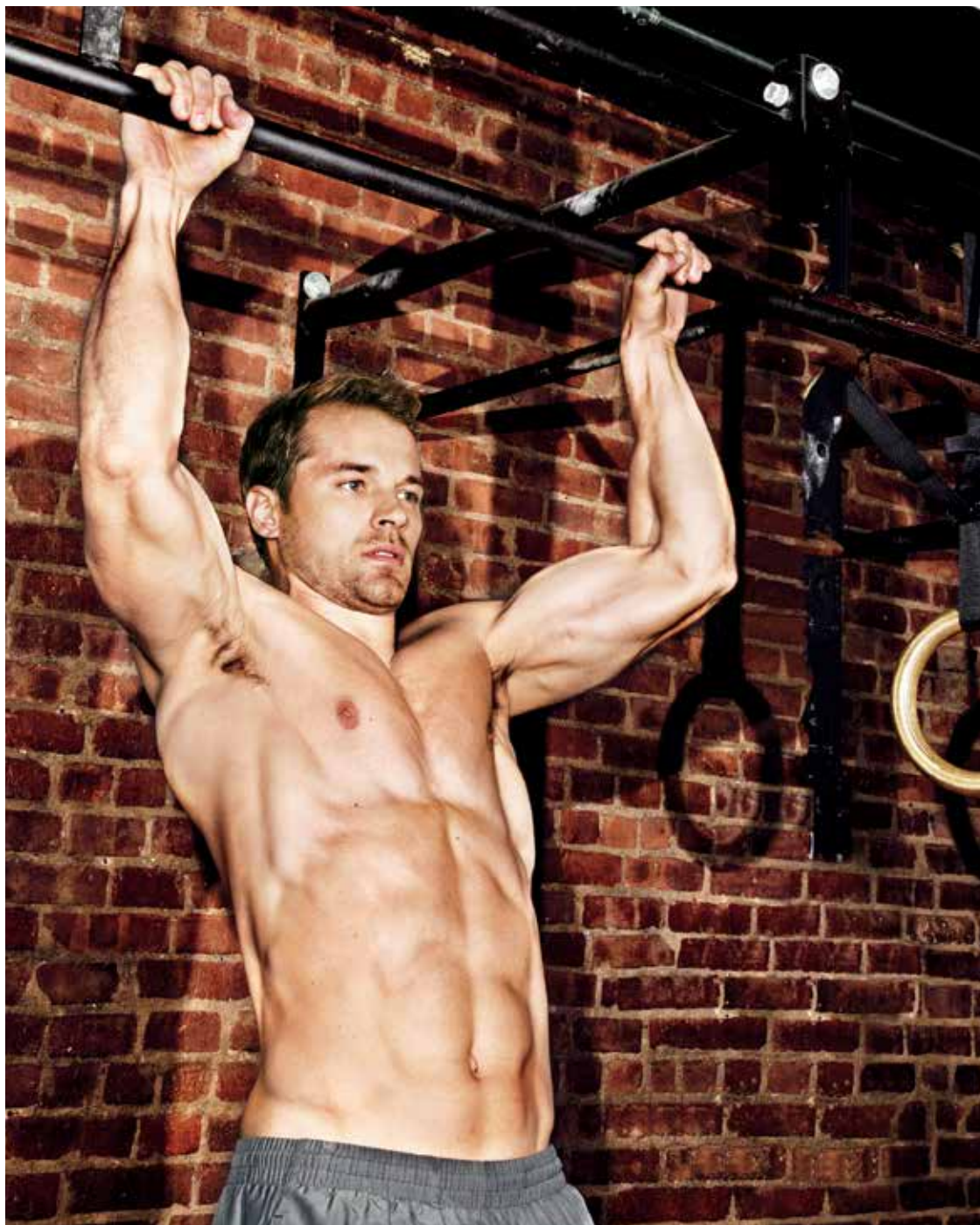


4B
Standing One-Arm
Cable Chest Press



4C
Glute Bridge
with Mini Band

*See page 28 for a tutorial on how to do each exercise, as well as any variations.



STAGE



3

EXERCISES / SETS / REPS

»»—————→ In the first two stages you used a technique called descending sets—fewer reps, heavier weights. Now you’re going to add a twist: back-off sets. After your heaviest set, you’ll do one or two more sets with lighter weights. They still won’t be *light* weights—in fact, they should be weights you would’ve perceived as relatively heavy when you started the program. But after lifting as much as you can handle for four reps, jumping up to a weight you can lift 10 or 12 times will feel like a vacation. Okay, not really. It should actually feel pretty hard if you’re doing it right. But the sensations will be very different. Your muscles will reach a new and deeper level of fatigue. They’ll seem more full—*pumped*, as the bodybuilders would say—and may feel a little shaky too.

Everything else is similar to what you’ve been doing. You’re just doing a little more of it, or making it a little harder.

STAGE 3

WORKOUT ONE

EXERCISE	SETS	REPS	TIME THROUGH THE WORKOUT					
			1ST	2ND	3RD	4TH	5TH	6TH
CORE TRAINING								
1 Side Plank with Rotation	2*	30^/30^						
PRIMARY STRENGTH EXERCISES								
2 Dumbbell or Kettlebell Sumo Deadlift	4	8/6/4/10						
3A Half-Kneeling One-Arm Shoulder Press	3*	10/10/10						
3B Underhand-Grip Inverted Row	3	10/10/10						
COMPLEMENTARY STRENGTH EXERCISES								
4A Reverse Lunge from Step	2*	8/8						
4B Pushup Variation	2	12/12						
4C Standing One-Arm Low-Cable Row**	2*	12/12						

* EACH SIDE / ^ SECONDS / ** ROTATE FROM OVERHAND TO UNDERHAND GRIP



CORE TRAINING



1
Side Plank with Rotation

PRIMARY STRENGTH EXERCISES



2
Dumbbell or Kettlebell
Sumo Deadlift



3A
Half-Kneeling One-Arm
Shoulder Press



3B
Underhand-Grip
Inverted Row

COMPLEMENTARY STRENGTH EXERCISES



4A
Reverse Lunge
from Step



4B
Pushup Variation



4C
Standing One-Arm
Low-Cable Row

*See page 28 for a tutorial on how to do each exercise, as well as any variations.

STAGE 3

WORKOUT TWO

EXERCISE	SETS	REPS	TIME THROUGH THE WORKOUT					
			1ST	2ND	3RD	4TH	5TH	6TH

CORE TRAINING

1 Pallof Press with Flutter 2* 30^/30^

PRIMARY STRENGTH EXERCISES

2 Dumbbell Bench Press 5 8/6/4/10/12

2B Dumbbell One-Arm Row, Hand Supported 5* 8/6/4/10/12

3 Offset-Loaded Stepup 3* 8/8/8

COMPLEMENTARY STRENGTH EXERCISES

4A Kneeling Two-Arm Cable Chest Press 2 12/12

4B Standing Lat Pulldown with Neutral Grip 2 12/12

4C Suitcase Carry 2* 30 steps/30 steps

* EACH SIDE / ^ SECONDS



CORE TRAINING



1A
Pallof Press with Flutter

PRIMARY STRENGTH EXERCISES



2A
Dumbbell Bench Press



2B
Dumbbell One-Arm
Row, Hand Supported



3
Offset-Loaded Stepup

COMPLEMENTARY STRENGTH EXERCISES



4A
Kneeling Two-Arm
Cable Chest Press



4B
Standing Lat Pulldown
with Neutral Grip



4C
Suitcase Carry

*See page 28 for a tutorial on how to do each exercise, as well as any variations.

THE EXERCISE GUIDE

»»————→ The Exercise Guide shows you how to do every exercise in the program. Each exercise will be listed under its target category: Core, Lower Body, or Upper Body. I've also included variations you can do to make the moves easier or harder. Don't skip "The Warmup" section, which will help you prepare your body for the workout ahead.

THE WARMUP



There are no rules for a warmup. As I noted earlier, the only requirement is that you're ready to lift by the time you start lifting. Experienced lifters tailor their warmup to their own needs, and I encourage you to experiment. For example, if you work out early in the morning, or in a chilly basement or garage, you probably want to spend more time getting your body warm and your mind focused. (If you're a coffee drinker, the caffeine can help raise your level of arousal.) Or if you're doing daily exercises recommending by a doctor or physical therapist, this would be a good place for them.

A PROPER WARMUP HAS THREE LEVELS:

1 GENERAL WARMUP: This can be as simple as a few minutes on a treadmill or stationary bike, or some jumping jacks or shadow boxing, or the walk from your car to the front door of the gym on a hot day. Or you can skip it entirely and go straight to the next level.

2 SEMI-SPECIFIC WARMUP: I made this term up to describe the four mobility exercises that you'll see on the following pages. Other coaches call it "movement prep." The point is to ensure your joints have a full range of motion for the strength exercises you're about to do. You can add other exercises you like, stretch, do foam rolling, or really anything that feels like it helps you get ready but doesn't wear you out.

3 SPECIFIC WARMUP: Before you do strength exercises with heavy loads, you want to do one or two practice sets with lighter weights. It isn't as much of a concern in a beginner program like this one, since you'll typically do your first set with a lighter weight anyway. (You'll see what I mean when you get to the workouts in the next section.) But as you get more advanced, or even in Stage 2 or Stage 3 of this program, you may want to do a lighter set of the primary strength exercises (especially deadlifts) before tackling the ones that count.

On the following page, you'll find a short list of mobility exercises that will help prep your body for the exercises in this program, but are not optional. Feel free to try them out or add to an already existing warmup.

MOBILITY EXERCISES



Body-Weight Squat

Stand with your feet shoulder-width apart, toes pointed forward, and arms straight out in front of you. Push your hips straight back, as if you were aiming them toward a chair. Descend until your upper thighs are parallel to the floor. Return to the starting position, with your knees and hips following the exact same path they used on the way down.

■ Do 10-15 reps.



Glute Bridge

Lie on your back, with your knees bent, feet on the floor, and arms out to your sides. Push down through your heels to lift your hips off the floor until your body forms a straight line from shoulders to knees. Hold for 2 seconds, feeling the contraction primarily in your glutes and secondarily in your hamstrings; you shouldn't feel any discomfort in your lower back. Lower your hips toward the floor, stopping just before they touch, and repeat.

■ Do 10 to 15 reps.



Hip Flexor Mobilization

Start again in the half-kneeling position—right knee and left foot on the floor. This time, keep your torso upright, with your hands on your hips. Squeeze your right glute muscle, and shift your hips forward. Feel the stretch down the right side of your pelvis and the top of your right thigh. Relax and return to the starting position. That's 1 rep.

■ Do 6 reps, then switch sides and repeat.



Kneeling Shoulder Rotation

Start in the half-kneeling position, with your right knee down and left foot forward. Bend forward from the hips so your torso is parallel to the floor, and place your right hand on the floor directly beneath your right shoulder and in line with your left foot. Rotate your upper torso as you reach up and back with your left hand. Follow your hand with your eyes. Both arms are now perpendicular to the floor. Reverse the movement, pulling your left arm down. Reach behind your right arm and past your torso.

■ That's 1 rep. Do 8 reps, then switch sides and repeat.



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CORE EXERCISES

CORE EXERCISES



Bird Dog

This exercise comes to us from Stuart McGill, Ph.D., the former professor of spine biomechanics at the University of Waterloo in Canada. It teaches your core muscles to coordinate arm and leg movements while keeping your shoulders and hips level and preventing your back from twisting.

HOW TO DO IT: Get down on all fours, with your hands directly beneath your shoulders and your knees below your hips. Slowly extend your right arm and left leg until they're parallel to the floor and in line with your torso and neck. Hold for 10 seconds, then pull them back to the starting position. Now extend your left arm and right leg, hold 10 seconds, and pull them back.

■ Try for three reps with each arm and leg extended. If you hold each rep for 10 seconds, one set will take just over a minute.

TIPS

■ Actively push your arm and leg away from your torso when you extend your limbs, and deliberately pull them back, rather than letting them drop to the floor.

■ When your limbs are fully extended, they should be aligned with your torso and on the same plane. You don't want an arm or a leg rising above or lingering below.

■ Your hips should stay parallel to the floor throughout the movement. That'll be a challenge at first, especially if you've never done the exercise. One side will probably rise higher than the other. To keep your hips down, try flexing your foot as you extend your leg, as if you're pointing your heel at someone standing behind you.

Curlup

Also from McGill, this exercise is recommended as an alternative to situps and crunches, which can be tough on your neck and back. It allows you to keep your entire spine in a safe position while giving your rectus abdominis—the six-pack muscles—a serious workout.

HOW TO DO IT: Lie on your back on the floor, with your left leg straight, right knee bent, and right foot flat on the floor. Place both hands, palms down, on the floor beneath your lower back, and then lift your elbows slightly. The back of your head, upper back, palms, and glutes all rest on the floor, along with the back of your left leg and your right foot. From that starting position, raise your head and shoulders *slightly*. Hold for 10 seconds, and return to the starting position. That's one repetition.

■ Do four to six reps per set. You can switch legs on each set if you want, but it's not necessary.



TIPS

- McGill suggests that you imagine your head is resting on a scale that's level with the floor; you want to raise your head and shoulders just enough for the scale to go to zero. Keep your head and neck in the exact same alignment. Tucking your chin to raise your head creates unnecessary strain on your neck.

CORE EXERCISES



Pallof Press

You need to be able to rotate your torso; virtually every sport we play involves some kind of twist. But the rotation has to occur at your shoulders and hips. The big, thick vertebrae of your lower back have a very short range of motion, just a degree or two in each direction. That's where *anti-rotation exercises* like the Pallof press—invented by physical therapist John Pallof—come into play.

HOW TO DO IT: Attach a D-shaped handle to a cable pulley, and set it to chest height. (You can also use a band.) Grab the handle with both hands and step out until you have tension in the cable. Stand sideways to the machine in an athletic position—feet shoulder-width apart, toes pointed forward, knees bent slightly, chest up, shoulders down, core tight, eyes focused straight ahead—holding the handle against your chest. Push the handle straight out from your chest until your arms are straight. Hold for 10 seconds. You should feel the torso and hip muscles on the side farthest from the machine working to keep you upright. Pull it back to your chest, and repeat.

■ Do 3 to 6 reps with 10-second holds, then turn around and repeat facing the opposite direction.



Pallof Press with Flutter

I learned this variation from trainer Nick Tumminello. Similar to the side plank with rotation, it adds limited movement to an exercise designed to train your body to resist movement.

HOW TO DO IT: Set up as described for the Pallof press. Push the handle straight out from your chest and move it back and forth across your torso about 8 to 10 inches (roughly nipple to nipple) while keeping your arms straight, shoulders square, and hips and shoulders aligned and facing straight ahead. Continue for 30 seconds, switch sides, and repeat.



CORE EXERCISES

Plank

The basic plank is an *anti-extension* exercise. It trains your core muscles to keep your lower back and pelvis locked in the neutral position, which means your lumbar spine retains its natural curve. Your core muscles need to work together to prevent your back from hyperextending into a deeper arch, which is potentially injurious. The plank develops endurance in those muscles, setting you up for success in pretty much everything you do in the weight room.

HOW TO DO IT: Get down on the floor in a modified pushup position, with your weight resting on your forearms and toes, and your body in a straight line from neck to ankles. You probably want to put a pad beneath your forearms, if you aren't on a padded or carpeted floor. Don't deliberately flex or brace anything. Just hold your body in that alignment. Hold for 30 to 60 seconds per set.



GLAD YOU ASKED

“WHAT’S WRONG WITH SITUPS AND CRUNCHES?”

■ McGill’s research shows that the repetitive spine bending of the situp will create an injury, sooner or later. And the bigger muscles you develop with the crunch don’t actually promote spinal stability—the ability for your core muscles to hold your lower back in a safe, neutral position during all kinds of movements and lifting challenges. Stability comes from a combination of strength, muscular endurance, and movement coordination. Stronger muscles provide more protection than weaker ones. Endurance protects your spine because you can maintain your posture longer while standing, sitting, or moving around. Coordination prevents you from hurting yourself when making the sudden, unanticipated movements that life sometimes requires.



Pushup Hold with Options

The pushup hold, as a stand-alone stability exercise, is as simple as the plank. But you have an option (actually two options, as you'll see) that makes it quite a bit more challenging.

HOW TO DO IT: Get into pushup position, with your hands about shoulder-width apart and your weight supported on your hands and toes. Set your body in a straight line from neck to ankles. Keep your entire body tight, paying special attention to your lower back and pelvis. Ideally, your posture in the pushup position is the same as it would be if you were standing up with your arms out in front of your chest.

■ If that's challenging enough for you, you can hold that position for 30 to 60 seconds. Or you can try one of these two options:

OPTION 1

Long-Lever Pushup Hold

From the pushup hold, walk your hands forward 6 to 12 inches, or even a bit farther if you can keep your lower back and pelvis in the neutral position. Hold there for 30 to 60 seconds.

OPTION 2

Walkout

From the pushup hold, walk your hands, one at a time, a few inches forward. Go as far as you can while keeping your lower back in the neutral position. Walk them back, and keep going back and forth for 30 to 60 seconds.

CORE EXERCISES



Side Plank

This one is an *anti-lateral-flexion* exercise, which means it helps develop strength and endurance in the muscles that prevent you from bending to the side when you need to stay upright. You do this every day without thinking about it, when you carry a single suitcase or bag of groceries with one arm. The side plank makes tasks like that easier.

HOW TO DO IT: Get on the floor with your weight resting on your right forearm and the outside edge of your right foot. (Make sure you set your forearm on a pad.) Stack your left foot on top of your right, and lift your body so it forms a straight line from your nose through the midline of your body. Rest your left hand on your left hip. Hold for 20 to 30 seconds, then switch sides and repeat.

Side Plank with Rotation

On the one hand, this is an advanced variation of the side plank, but to me it feels like it's more than that. It's still an anti-lateral-flexion exercise, but you're also rotating your shoulders through a small range of motion. It feels like a strength, stability, and mobility exercise all at once, challenging all your core muscles in a unique way.

HOW TO DO IT: The setup is a little different from the side plank. Instead of stacking your feet, you'll put the foot of your top leg just slightly in front of your bottom foot, with the inside edge of that foot resting on the floor. Now, with your top hand resting on your hip, rotate your top shoulder toward the floor, with your head, torso, and hips moving as a unit. Pause, then return to the starting position. Continue for up to 30 seconds, then switch sides and repeat.

TIPS

■ McGill describes the movement as “rolling your navel toward the floor.” Think of it as a turn, rather than a twist.





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LOWER-BODY EXERCISES



CARRIES

■ The carry is a simple exercise. You pick the weights up the same way you'd lift them for any other exercise. That is, *carefully*. Stand straight, striving for the same posture you'd have if you weren't holding something heavy. Now... walk. One foot in front of the other. You can make it more challenging by using heavier weights, obviously, but also by increasing the challenge to your balance or stability, as you'll see in the following variations.



Farmer's Carry

You have several loading options. Dumbbells are the most convenient. Grip plates—weight plates with open slots that make them easy to carry—can also work. Kettlebells are a great choice, if you have access to pairs that are heavy enough for this exercise. (Your strength will increase quickly, so the weight you start with might seem puny after a couple of weeks.) Serious strength athletes use farmer's bars—barbells with a handle in the middle. Or you can use a hex bar.

HOW TO DO IT: One of your biggest challenges is picking up the weights. Set them on the floor about shoulder-width apart. Stand between them. Squat down and grab one with each hand. Set your body as if you're going to do a deadlift, with a tight grip, straight arms, chest up, hips back, and heels flat on the floor (or as close as you can get them). Pull the weights up off the floor and stand with them at your sides. Now walk, keeping your shoulders down and back and neck aligned with your torso. Take 30 steps (or as many as you can in whatever space you have). Set the weights down as carefully as you lifted them.

LOWER-BODY EXERCISES



One-Arm Overhead Carry

This variation gives you three challenges: First, you have to keep your arm straight overhead, which requires both mobility (to keep your arm in line with your torso without going forward) and stability (to hold your shoulder joint in place). Then you have to keep your ribs locked in their natural position, rather than allowing them to lift and flare out. Finally, there's a mild challenge to your side-to-side balance, since the weight won't be aligned with the center of your body.

HOW TO DO IT: Hold anything you want with one arm straight overhead. Again, a dumbbell is easiest, although a kettlebell is great if you have that option. Take 30 steps (or as many as you can in whatever space you have), switch the weight to the opposite arm, and repeat. That's one set.

Suitcase Carry

Now we get to a real challenge: holding a relatively heavy weight on one side while keeping your body upright. It's a terrific core exercise, since all your abdominal muscles (the obliques especially) have to work hard in concert with your lower back, hips, and shoulders. The goal is to walk with a natural posture, keeping your shoulders and hips level, even though the weight is pulling you to one side.

HOW TO DO IT: Stand with the weight on the outside of your right foot. Squat down and grab the weight with your right hand. Set your body as described for the farmer's carry: tight grip, straight left arm, chest up, hips back, heels on or very close to the floor. When you pull the weight up and stand, you're doing an actual exercise called the suitcase deadlift. Stand upright and take 30 steps (or as many as you can in the space you have). Set the weight down as carefully as you lifted it. Turn around so the weight is on the outside of your left foot. Squat down, repeat the suitcase deadlift, and walk. That's one set.



LOWER-BODY EXERCISES

DEADLIFT VARIATIONS

■ Previously, I described the importance of the hip-hinge movement pattern, and how complicated it can be to talk about a relatively straightforward movement. After all, a hip-hinge essentially describes the movement of straightening your hips. And when we're talking about the basic glute bridge that you'll do in your warmups, it really is simple to pull off: You just lie on the floor and push your hips upward. But when we shift to these deadlift variations, and you're pulling increasingly heavy weights off the floor, the details are crucial. You need to engage the right muscles in the right movement pattern, and then get as strong as you can without compromising your form.

HERE'S WHAT YOUR FORM SHOULD LOOK LIKE ON ALL THE FOLLOWING VARIATIONS:

- When you're pulling a weight from the floor, the center of its mass should be directly below your shoulders, never in front of it. That applies to a barbell, dumbbell, or kettlebell.
- Grab the object you're lifting with a firm, borderline-homicidal grip.
- With your grip locked, straighten your arms, lift your chest, pull your shoulders down, and push your hips back. This will naturally brace your core and fix your lower back in a neutral position.
- Focus your eyes on an imaginary spot on the floor about 15 feet in front of you. This will keep your neck aligned with your back.
- Now pull the weight straight up, thrusting your hips forward as your hands pass your knees.
- Finish the lift by squeezing your glutes and shoulder blades. You may not feel the muscles in your upper and middle back working, but over time, as you lift increasingly heavy weights with good form, you'll get a better sense of how important they are in a deadlift.
- Push your hips back and lower the bar to the floor with control.
- Tighten your grip and reset your body for the next lift.





Dumbbell or Barbell Romanian Deadlift

This deadlift variation is different in two ways: First, you start with your body straight and lower the weight toward the floor, rather than lifting it off the floor from a dead stop. Second, you limit the range of motion, with minimal knee bend. Bodybuilders think of it as a hamstring exercise, since you'll probably feel it most there. But for our purposes the goal is to focus on the hip hinge, working all the muscles that straighten your hips while keeping your lower back locked into a safe position.

HOW TO DO IT: You can do this exercise with a barbell or pair of dumbbells. Whichever you choose, stand holding the weights with straight arms in front of your thighs. Set your feet about shoulder-width apart, toes forward. Push your hips back and lower the weights toward the floor, keeping your back straight and your shoulders and torso tight. Stop when the weights pass your knees, or sooner if you feel your lower back start to shift out of its natural arch. Push your hips forward and return to the starting position.

LOWER-BODY EXERCISES



Dumbbell or Kettlebell Sumo Deadlift

If you have access to kettlebells, they're the best option at the start of the program. But I say that knowing that some commercial gyms don't have any kettlebells at all, and the ones that do rarely go above 20 kilograms/44 pounds. If you're a 180-pound guy, that's less than a quarter of your body weight. You might need something heavier for your very first workout.

Most gyms will have dumbbells that go heavier. One Planet Fitness I checked out had 70-pounders at the end of their dumbbell rack, and big chains like Gold's and LA Fitness go well beyond 100 pounds. That should be more than enough for Stage 1 of this program.

HOW TO DO IT: Stand over the weight with your feet wide apart and toes turned out slightly. (If you're using a dumbbell, stand it upright.) Grab the top or handle with both hands. Tighten your grip, straighten your arms, lift your chest, pull your shoulders down, and push your hips back. Tighten everything and focus your eyes on an imaginary spot on the floor about 15 feet in front of you. Pull the weight straight up, thrusting your hips forward as your hands pass your knees. Finish the lift by squeezing your glutes and shoulder blades, then push your hips back as you lower the weight to the floor. Tighten your grip and reset your body for the next repetition.

VARIATION

If your gym has pairs of kettlebells (which is rare but not unheard of), you can lift two at a time. Set the weights together on the floor, with the handles parallel. Grab one with each hand, your palms facing each other. Then follow the directions for lifting a single kettlebell or dumbbell.



GLAD YOU ASKED

“WHAT KIND OF SHOES SHOULD I WEAR WHEN I LIFT?”

■ For deadlifts, you want your feet as low to the ground as possible. That means wearing the flattest shoes you can find. Powerlifters often wear Converse Chuck Taylors, which were originally designed for basketball but are actually terrible for that sport, since they offer no lateral support for the feet and ankles. They are, however, just about perfect for deadlifting, since there's no extra padding in the heel and the entire foot stays level with the floor. (Some experienced lifters prefer to deadlift without shoes, which is always an option if you work out at home or at a gym where you can get away with it.)

Squats are a different story. Olympic weightlifters, whose sport forces them to drop into a deep squat on the snatch and clean and jerk, wear shoes with a very solid, built-up heel. The heel allows them to keep an upright torso while holding massive weights on their shoulders, and the shoes also provide lateral support.

At the opposite extreme are the running shoes you may have in your closet, and that a lot of first-time lifters will wear to the gym. The cushioned insoles and built-up heels are designed to absorb impact while running, whereas the solid heels of weightlifting shoes are there to help transmit force upward. That's why they're useless for anything *but* weightlifting. You certainly couldn't run or even walk comfortably in them, while running shoes probably feel comfortable in just about any situation.

Strength training is one situation where comfort can be deceiving. Cushioning is the last thing you want when you're lifting, especially when you're learning lifts like squat, deadlifts, and even lunges and stepups. You want to feel your feet in contact with the floor. You also need to learn to keep your heels down, and to transmit force upward through your entire foot, rather than forward, as you would while walking or running.

Cross-trainers are a good compromise, especially the minimalist shoes designed to be as close to barefoot as you can get. But they're expensive, and I'm pretty sure the last thing you want to do is go out and buy a new pair of shoes just for a handful of exercises in your workout program.

My advice: If you have a pair of cross-trainers on hand, try removing the insoles, putting your feet closer to the floor, and see if they're tolerable for an hour at a time. You can put the insoles back in for anything else you do in them.

If you only have running shoes, consider an inexpensive pair of canvas sneakers, like Chuck Taylors, or a similar low-frills option.

LOWER-BODY EXERCISES

Sumo Deadlift

This is the first “real” deadlift in the program, which is to say it’s one you could do in a powerlifting competition because you’re pulling a loaded Olympic barbell off the floor. That requires a few notes and explanations before I get to the exercise.

The description for the sumo deadlift assumes that you can start with a 45-pound weight plate on each side of the Olympic bar. Counting the 45-pound bar, that’s 135 pounds, and it puts the bar about 8 inches off the floor. But if you can’t yet train with 135 pounds, you have to make some adjustments. Starting with lighter weights means the bar will sit a couple inches lower. You have to bend farther to lift it, which increases the risk to your lower back.

HOW TO DO IT: Step up to the barbell with a double-shoulder-width stance and toes pointed out about 45 degrees. Bend over and grab the bar with your arms inside your legs and about shoulder-width apart. Tighten your grip, straighten your arms, lift your chest, pull your shoulders down, and push your hips back. Pull the weight straight up, thrusting your hips forward as your hands pass your knees. Finish the lift by squeezing your glutes and shoulder blades, then push your hips back as you lower the weight to the floor. Tighten your grip and reset your body for the next repetition.





■ You have a couple of options:

OPTION 1

If your gym has bumper plates—lighter plates that are 17 inches in diameter, the same size as the 45s—use those.

OPTION 2

No bumper plates? You can set the bar on a pair of low boxes or steps, or on the safety bars of a squat rack. You'll see that option on the following pages, along with one using a hex bar, which is a good choice is your gym has one or you can afford it for your home gym.

OPTION 3

No matter your strength or experience, you want to start with your feet as low to the ground as possible. That means wearing the flattest shoes you can find, as described in the sidebar on page 47, or lifting without shoes, if you train at home or at a gym where you can get away with it.

OPTION 4

Rack Deadlift

You can set the bar a few inches off the floor using anything you have available: a couple of sturdy boxes, the safety bars of a squat rack, or a couple of weight plates on the floor. With this option, you probably want to use a conventional deadlift, with your feet shoulder-width apart and hands just outside your legs. It's a bit more challenging than the sumo deadlift; you start with a deeper hip hinge, which means you're less upright and your lower back is in a more vulnerable position. But if you start with the bar several inches off the floor, the range of motion should be about the same.



OPTION 5

Hex-Bar Deadlift

Most hex bars in gyms today have two sets of handles. The lower handles will be the usual 8 inches above the floor when lifting 45-pound plates. The second set is several inches higher, which cuts the range of motion and allows you to lift heavier weights. Unlike Olympic barbells, which always weigh 45 pounds (technically, they're 44 pounds/20 kilograms, but we round it up to 45 to keep the math simple), there's no standard weight for a hex bar. It might be 45 pounds, or 50, or 55. It also could be less.

If your gym's hex bar doesn't have high handles, it can still be a good choice for you if you can start with the bar a few inches off the floor, using boxes or weight plates.

With any setup, you'll stand in the middle with your feet shoulder-width apart and toes pointed forward. Squat down and grab the handles, and then follow the steps for the other deadlift variations.



LOWER-BODY EXERCISES



Glute Bridge with Mini Band

Mini bands are typically 9 inches long and 2 inches wide, and are color-coded for different levels of resistance. (With the bands from performbetter.com, the lightest is yellow, followed by green, blue, and black.) If your gym doesn't have them you can purchase your own for a few dollars each. I recommend having the full range available, since you don't know exactly what you need until you start using it. Once you find the right band to begin, you'll quickly outgrow it as your strength increases.

HOW TO DO IT: Put the band around your thighs, just above the knees. Lie on your back with your knees bent and feet flat on the floor about shoulder-distance apart. The band should pull your knees in close together. Lift your hips until your body forms a straight line from your chest to your knees. At the same time, spread your knees until they're the same distance apart as your feet, feeling the squeeze in your glutes but not in your lower back. Hold for 10 seconds, then relax your knees as you lower your hips to the floor. Immediately begin the next repetition.

Goblet Squat

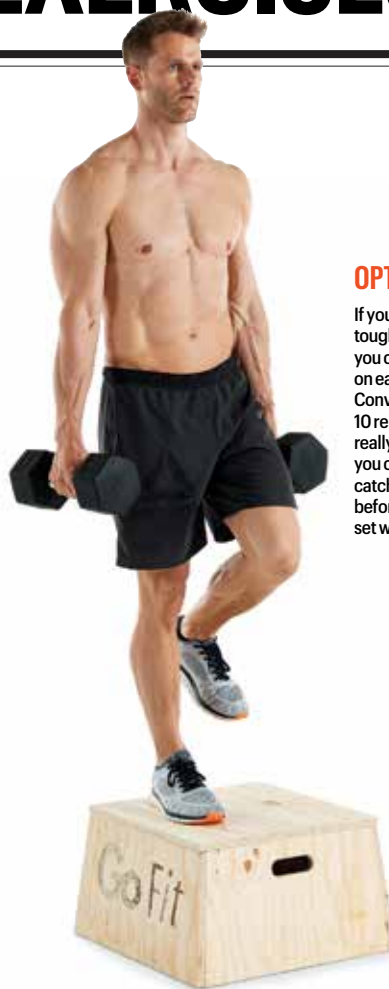
This exercise should look and feel exactly the same as the body-weight squat in the warmup section. The only difference is the weight in your hands. Yes, that's a big difference, but it shouldn't change your form. Once your form feels solid, and each repetition feels just like the others, you can be aggressive with the load. As with any other exercise in the program, you know you're using enough if you get to the end of the set and feel you could maybe do 1 or 2 more reps with good form. A good weight for you will probably be less than the weight you use for the dumbbell sumo deadlift and more than you use for any of the upper-body exercises.

HOW TO DO IT: Grab a dumbbell and hold it against your chest, parallel to your torso, with your hands on either side of the top end. Spread your feet just a bit beyond shoulder-width apart, with your toes either pointed straight ahead or angled out slightly. Focus your eyes straight ahead. Push your hips back and descend into a squat. Return to the starting position.



LOWER-BODY EXERCISES

STEPUP VARIATIONS



OPTION

If you're looking for a tougher workout, you can switch legs on each repetition. Conversely, if you find 10 reps with one leg really challenging, you can stop and catch your breath before you repeat the set with the other leg.

Stepup

For some of you, this exercise might be challenging enough at first with just your body weight. But most will start with some kind of external load. The easiest is to hold a dumbbell in each hand at arm's length, as I'll describe here. You also have to decide how high a step you want to use. If you have any knee problems, I recommend a low step, at least to begin with. No limitations? The higher the step, the harder your hip and thigh muscles will work.

HOW TO DO IT: Grab a pair of dumbbells and stand facing a sturdy bench, box, or step. Place one foot on the step, with the other on the floor. Push down through the heel of your working leg, and raise yourself up until your knee is straight and your nonworking foot reaches the step. Without touching the step, lower your nonworking foot to the floor and begin the next repetition. Don't push off the floor; the top leg does all the work here. Finish the set, switch legs, and repeat.



Offset-Loaded Stepup

HOW TO DO IT: Hold a single dumbbell or kettlebell, either at shoulder height or arm's length, on the opposite side of your working leg. So you'd hold it in your right hand while stepping up with your left leg. The offset load, especially at shoulder height, adds a stability challenge. Place one foot on the step, with the other on the floor. Push down through the heel of your working leg, and raise yourself up until your knee is straight and your nonworking foot reaches the step. Without touching the step, lower your nonworking foot to the floor and begin the next repetition. Finish the set, switch legs, and repeat.



LOWER-BODY EXERCISES

Reverse Lunge

As with the stepup, the lunge may be challenging enough at first with just your body weight. When you need to use weights, it's easiest to start with a dumbbell in each hand.

HOW TO DO IT: Grab a pair of dumbbells and stand holding them with your feet about hip-width apart. Step back with your right leg, plant your right toes on the floor, and lower your body until your front knee is bent about 90 degrees and your rear knee is close to the floor. Push back up to the starting position. You can do all the reps with one leg at a time (which I recommend), or alternate on each repetition—step back with your right, return; step back with your left, etc.





Reverse Lunge from Step

HOW TO DO IT: Grab a pair a dumbbells and stand on a low box or step with your feet about hip-width apart. Step back with your right leg, plant your right toes on the floor, and lower your body until your front knee is bent about 90 degrees and your rear knee is close to the floor. Push back up to the starting position. You can do all the reps with one leg at a time or alternate on each repetition.



- Page 57** Half-Kneeling One-Arm Cable Chest Press
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UPPER-BODY EXERCISES



CABLE-CHEST PRESS VARIATIONS

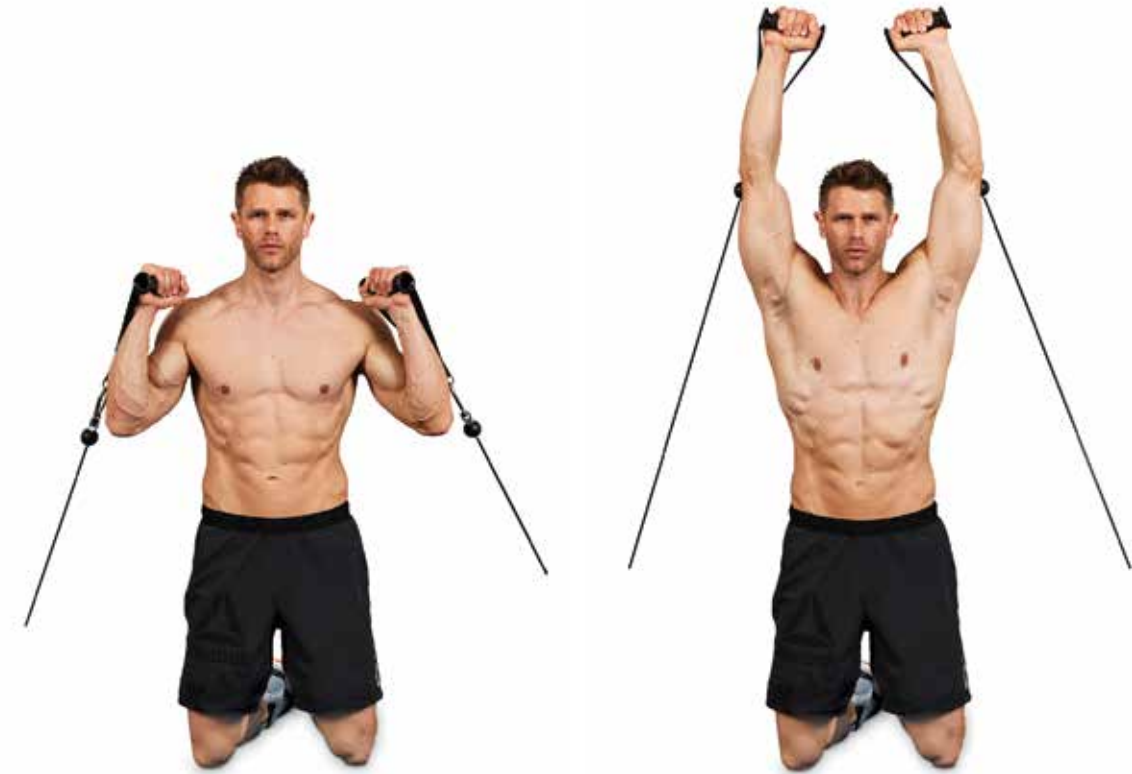
■ These exercises—which you can do with resistance bands if you don't have access to a cable machine—develop the muscles that support your chest and shoulders during heavier lifts like the bench press. Your oblique muscles are heavily engaged.



Half-Kneeling One-Arm Cable Chest Press

HOW TO DO IT: Attach a D-shaped handle to a cable pulley, and set it to waist height. Grab the handle with your right hand and pull it to your right shoulder as you kneel on your right knee with your back to the cable apparatus. Get your torso tall and straight, with your hips and shoulders square. Push the cable straight out from your shoulder. Return to the starting position, do all your reps, switch sides, and repeat the set.

UPPER-BODY EXERCISES



Kneeling Two-Arm Cable Chest Press

For this one you'll need two cable pulleys that are fairly close to each other. If your gym has a cable crossover machine, that'll work. Most of the time, someone working with both cables will stand between them in a staggered stance (one leg ahead of the other) and do chest flies—a horizontal pulling exercise that you do with your elbows in a fixed position. It's designed to isolate the chest muscles. This variation is a press from a deliberately disadvantaged position. You'll have to activate stabilizing muscles from your shoulders to your hips to keep the cables from pulling you out of position.

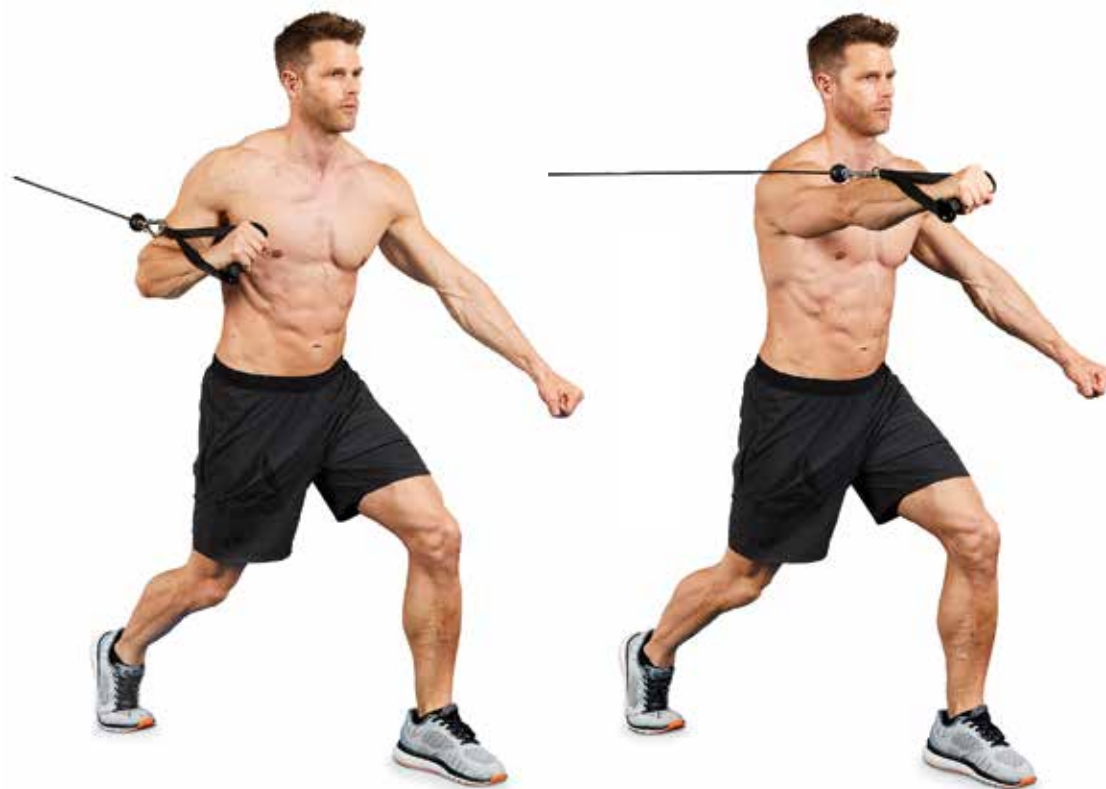
HOW TO DO IT: Attach D-shaped handles to two cable pulleys at about hip or waist height. Grab one handle with each hand, pull them to your shoulders, and kneel between them, back to the weight stacks. Set your body in a straight line from neck to knees and tighten everything. Push the handles straight out from your shoulders. Bring them back slowly, creating resistance throughout the movement.



Standing One-Arm Cable Chest Press

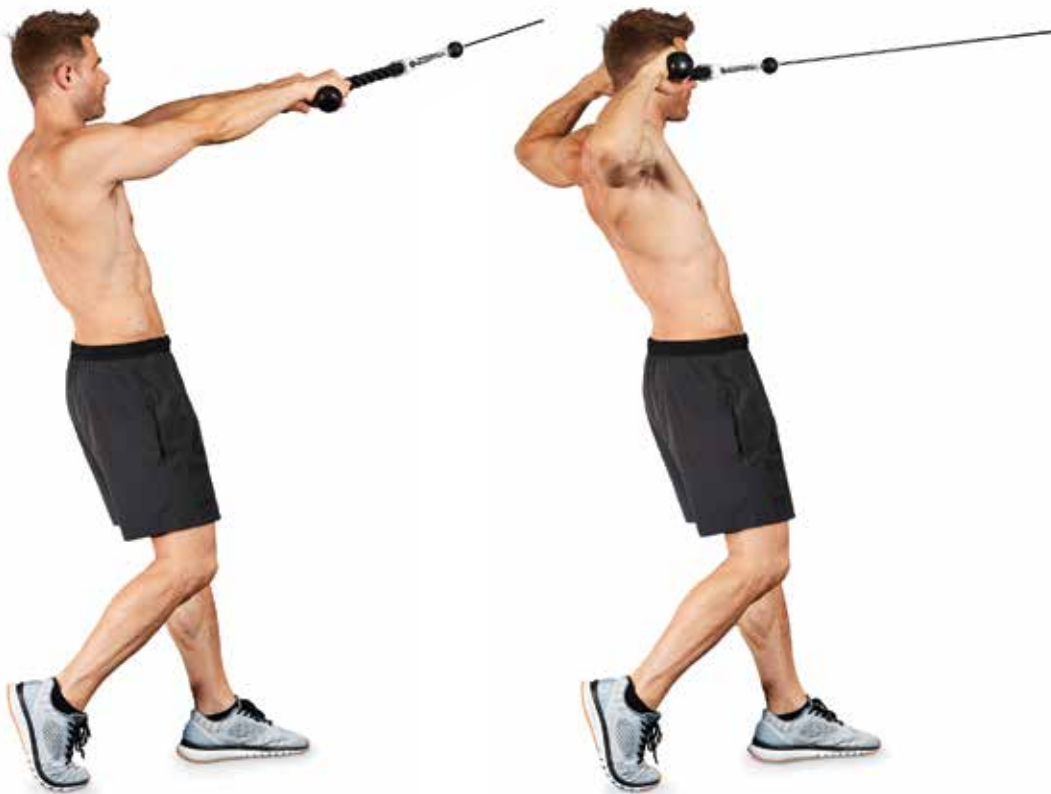
HOW TO DO IT: Attach a D-shaped handle to a cable pulley, and set it to chest height. Grab the handle with both hands and pull it to your chest. Now, holding it with just your right hand, stand with your back to the weight stack and your legs in a split stance, with your left leg ahead of your right and your knees bent slightly. Push the cable straight out from your shoulder. Return to the starting position, do all your reps, switch sides, and repeat the set.

A single cable apparatus can give you nearly countless options—all the pulldown and row variations you'll see on the following pages, the pressing options you've already seen, and dozens, if not hundreds, of exercises that aren't in this program. Even with the ones I include here, you have lots of choices. You can change the height of the pulley to hit your muscles from new angles; change attachments to go from single- to double-arm, or from a wide to narrow grip; choose an overhand or underhand grip, or something in between; change your own position from standing to kneeling; or shift your feet from an even to a staggered stance (one leg in front of the other).



UPPER-BODY EXERCISES

LAT PULLDOWN AND CABLE ROW VARIATIONS



Face Pull

This exercise works the muscles across your upper back, with special focus on some smaller ones in the complex of moving parts that make up your shoulder girdle. Feeling those muscles work, and developing their strength and endurance, should improve your posture and perhaps help you prevent upper-back and shoulder injuries.

HOW TO DO IT: Attach a rope handle to the cable pulley and move it to about eye level. Grab the ends of the rope with both hands and step back just far enough to put tension on the cable when your arms are straight. Stand facing the cable machine with a staggered stance. Pull the rope with both arms, aiming the middle of the attachment toward your nose or mouth. Pause when you've pulled as far as you can, slowly return to the starting position, and repeat.



Half-Kneeling One-Arm Cable Row

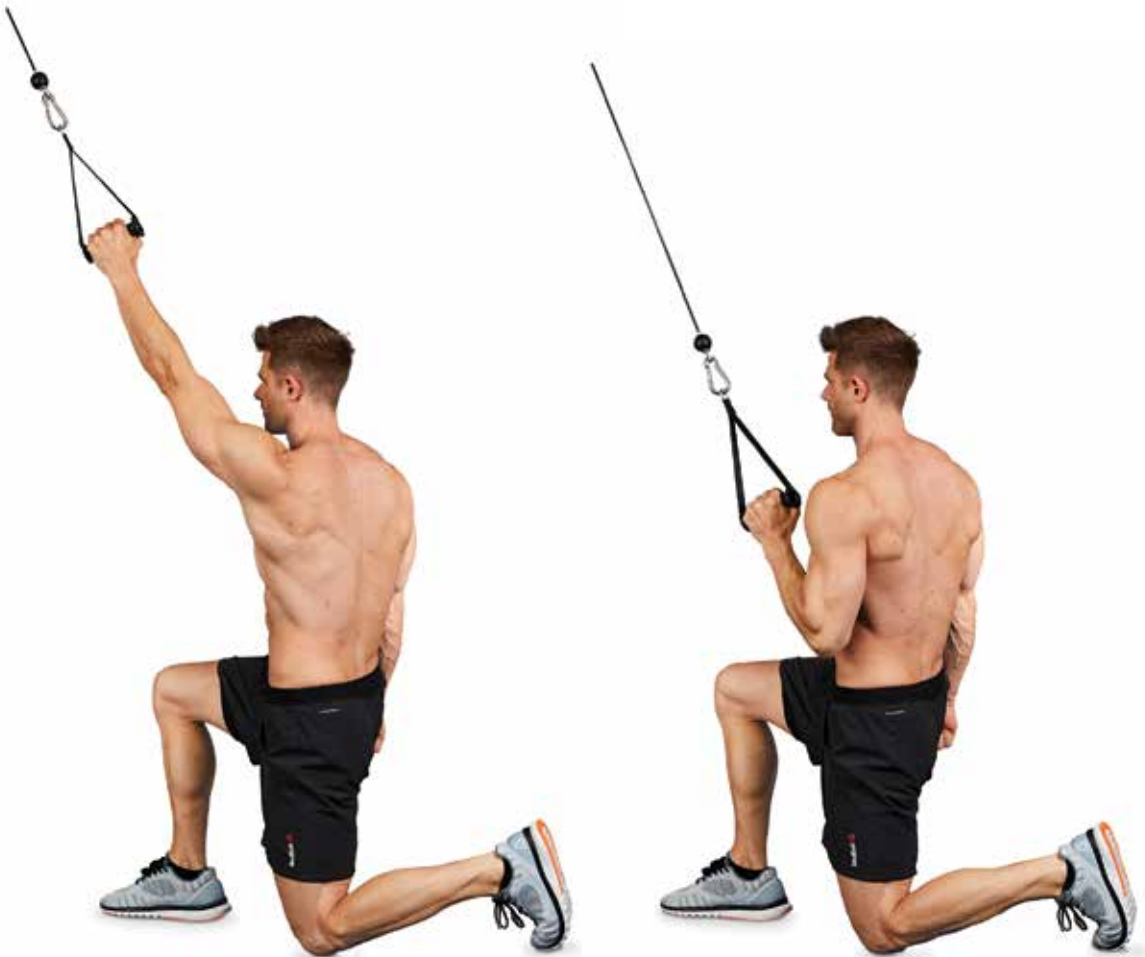
HOW TO DO IT: Attach a D-shaped handle to a pulley set at about hip height. Grab the handle with your right hand, step back just far enough to put tension on the cable when your arm is straight, and kneel facing the cable machine, with your left knee forward. Pull the handle to the side of your waist, pause, return to the starting position, and repeat. Do all your reps, switch sides, and repeat the set.

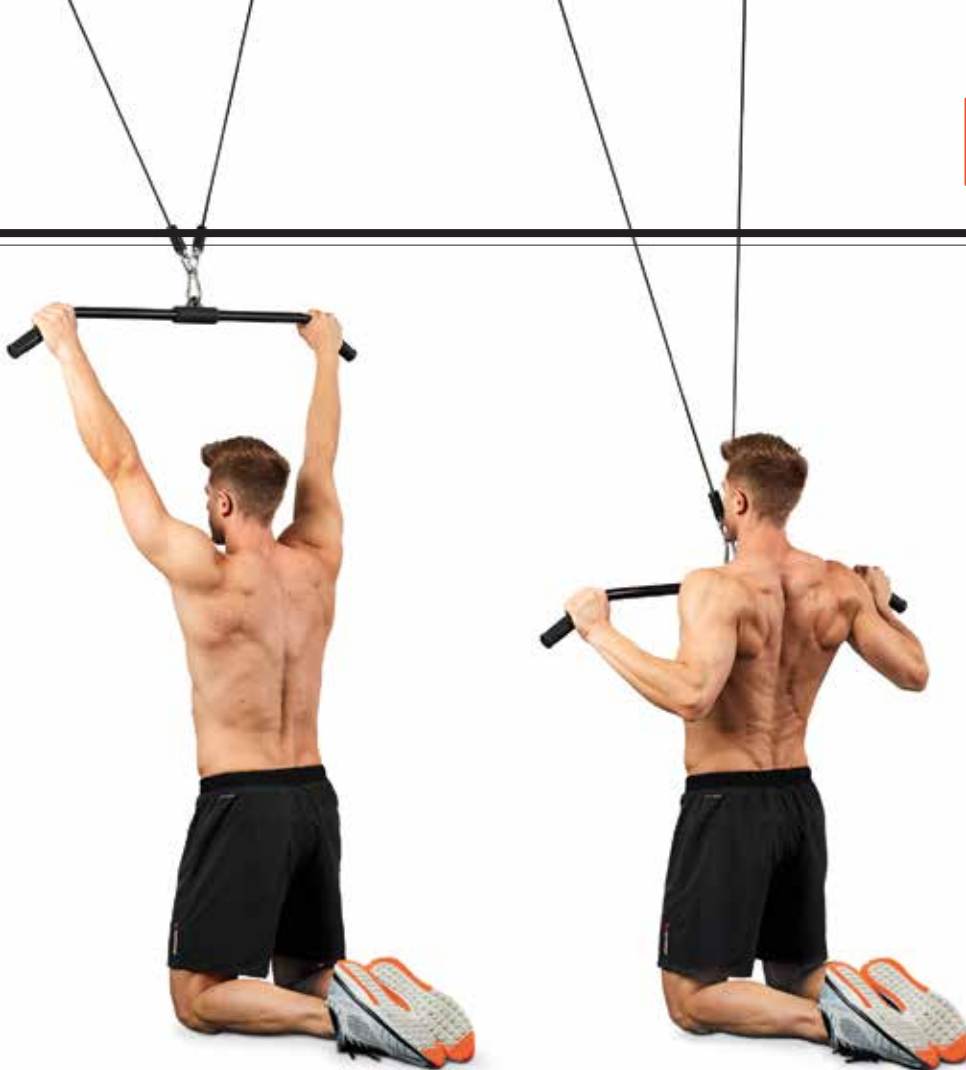


UPPER-BODY EXERCISES

Half-Kneeling One-Arm Lat Pulldown

HOW TO DO IT: Attach a D-shaped handle to the high pulley. Grab the handle with your left hand, and step back just far enough to put tension on the cable when your arm is straight. Kneel facing the cable machine, with your right knee forward. Pull the handle to the side of your chest, keeping your shoulders and hips square to the machine. (Your shoulders will rotate a bit, but try to minimize it.) Pause for a second, then slowly straighten your arm to the starting position. Do all your reps, switch sides, and repeat the set.





Kneeling Lat Pulldown

Why not just use the seat of the lat-pulldown station? It would certainly be simpler, especially for someone who's new to the gym and doesn't want to do anything obvious to stand out from the crowd. But my years in the gym have shown me, repeatedly, that the simplest way to do the exercise is often the worst. The goal is to pull the bar down to your chest by activating muscles in your upper and middle back. You want to finish each rep by squeezing your shoulder blades together. I often see inexperienced lifters do the opposite, rolling their shoulders forward instead of pulling them back and down. Kneeling puts you a little farther away from the weight stack, making it easier to engage the right muscles and harder to do it wrong.

HOW TO DO IT: Attach a long bar to the overhead pulley. Grab the bar with a wide, overhand grip, and kneel on the floor, facing the weight stack. Pull the bar to your upper chest, and at the same time *push your chest out* to meet the bar. That ensures the strongest contraction in your lats and traps. Hold the contraction for a second, then return to the bar to the starting position and repeat.

UPPER-BODY EXERCISES



Standing Lat Pulldown with Neutral Grip

HOW TO DO IT: Attach a triangle-shaped handle to the high pulley. Grab it with both hands, step back to put tension on the cable, and stagger your feet for balance. Or, if you're using a lat-pulldown station, rest one foot on the seat or leg support. Tighten everything, and lean back slightly to create a straight line of pull from the attachment point to your chest. Pull the handle to your chest, squeeze your upper back, return to the starting position, and repeat.



Standing One-Arm Low-Cable Row

HOW TO DO IT: Attach a D-shaped handle to the high pulley. Grab the handle with your right hand, and step back just far enough to put tension on the cable when your arm is straight. Stand facing the cable machine, with your feet parallel to each other, knees bent, and upper body bent forward at the hips. Put your left arm behind you, with your knuckles resting on your lower back as a cue to keep it in the neutral position. Pull the handle to the side of your waist, rotating it so your palm faces up at the end, while keeping your shoulders and hips square to the machine. Pause for a moment, then slowly return to the starting position. Do all your reps, switch sides, and repeat the set.



UPPER-BODY EXERCISES

PRESS VARIATION



Dumbbell Bench Press

There are just two exercises that appear in every stage of the program. One is the single-arm row; this is the other. They're the primary strength exercises for your upper body. With equivalent effort you should achieve equivalent gains in strength and muscle size.

That said, I don't consider either of them the most *important* exercises you'll do over the next 12 weeks. I think the pushup and inverted row (which you'll see later in this section) offer a better test of how well your body functions, and how much strength you have relative to your own body weight.

Here's the problem with using the pushup as our primary strength exercise: Some beginners, for strength or health reasons, can't do pushups well enough to build a workout around them, while other lifters do them *too* well. To make the exercise harder, lifters in the second group have to increase challenges to their balance, stability, and coordination, which might actually diminish the challenge to the chest, shoulders, and triceps.

The dumbbell bench press, conversely, can be done the same way by almost everyone. You increase the challenge by using more weight, and keep using more until you either reach the end of the dumbbell rack, max out your genetic potential, or develop a new hobby.

HOW TO DO IT: Grab a pair of dumbbells and lie on your back on a flat bench. (You can also set the bench at an incline between 15 and 45 degrees, either for variety or to alleviate shoulder discomfort.) Hold the weights straight up over your shoulders with your palms turned toward your feet. Spread your knees wide apart, with your feet on the floor. Tighten up your body and arch your back; only your head, upper back, and buttocks should rest on the bench. Lower the weights to the outside edges of your shoulders. If you have long arms, you can stop when your upper arms are even with the bench. Push the weights straight up from your shoulders and repeat.



PUSHUP VARIATIONS

■ Done right, the pushup is an outstanding total-body exercise. It not only hits the featured muscles—the chest, front shoulders, and triceps—it’s also a pretty good core exercise. (In fact, the starting position is used that way in Stage 2.) You’ll do some type of pushup in each stage of the program. Even though the sets and reps are the same (2 sets of 10 to 12 per workout), the goal is to challenge yourself to use tougher variations as you get stronger.

For some, 10 to 12 traditional pushups will be too easy from the get-go, while for others, it’ll be too hard. So in the following pages you’ll see lots of options.



Traditional Pushup

HOW TO DO IT: Get into position with your hands directly below your shoulders, feet hip-width apart, and your body in a straight line from neck to ankles. Bend your elbows and lower your body as a *unit* toward the floor. Stop when your chest is an inch from the floor, or your upper arms are parallel to the floor, whichever comes first. (The latter stopping point is important for lifters who’re tall, thin, and/or long-armed. Going too deep can be very tough on your shoulder joints.) Push yourself back up to the starting position. *Be sure to complete each repetition*, with your arms straight and upper back flat. You’ll get better results from fewer reps with a full range of motion than you will from cranking them out like your high school gym teacher is counting.

UPPER-BODY EXERCISES

MAKE IT EASIER

OPTION

Elevate your hands on a low box, the bar of a Smith machine (the barbell that slides up and down on rails; most health clubs have them), a bench, or anything else solid enough to support your weight. The form is exactly the same: Lower and raise your body as a unit, keeping it straight from neck to ankles. Start with an angle that's just high enough for you to finish your reps. As you get stronger, work your way down to the floor.



MAKE IT HARDER

OPTION 1

Elevate your feet.



OPTION 2

Move your hands closer together, which puts more emphasis on your triceps.

OPTION 3

Add a weight vest, or another form of resistance.

OPTION 4

Stagger your hands, so one is farther forward. Do two sets, each with a different arm forward. It's not only a unique challenge for your chest and shoulder muscles, it's a pretty good core workout as well.



OPTION 5

Put your hands on a pair of same-size medicine balls, or both hands on one medicine ball.



OPTION 6

Create instability, either by putting your feet on a Swiss ball or in the loops of a suspension system, or by doing the same thing with your hands.



UPPER-BODY EXERCISES

ROW VARIATIONS



Dumbbell Standing One-Arm Row

This, as aforementioned, is the primary strength exercise for the muscles in your upper back and biceps. As you get stronger you can use a lot of weight while keeping your lower back in a safe position. But heavy weights are for later. For now, focus on getting the movement pattern locked in.

HOW TO DO IT: Grab a dumbbell with your right hand. Stand with your left foot forward, knee bent, and your left hand resting on your thigh, just above the knee. Bend forward so your torso is at a 45-degree angle to the floor and your right arm hangs straight down from your shoulder. Pull the weight to the side of your torso. Slowly lower it to the starting position. Keep your shoulders square for every rep. Put another way, don't allow your upper body to rotate. Do all your reps, then switch sides and repeat. That's one set.



Dumbbell One-Arm Row, Hand Supported

HOW TO DO IT: Set a dumbbell on the floor next to a bench or a sturdy step that's about 18 to 24 inches high. Bend forward at the hips, keeping your back straight, and rest one hand on the bench. Pick up the dumbbell with the other hand. Start with your arm hanging straight down from your shoulder. Pull the dumbbell up to the side of your torso, again without rotating your shoulders. Do all your reps, then switch sides and repeat. That's one set.



UPPER-BODY EXERCISES

Inverted Row

The inverted row mirrors the pushup. It uses the muscles on the opposite side of your torso to produce the opposite action. It's a shame that it isn't better known and easier to set up, since I think it's equal to the pushup in terms of functional importance. It requires all the muscles in your middle and upper back, along with your biceps and the gripping muscles in your forearms, to work in concert, while supported by stabilizing muscles in your abdomen and hips.

HOW TO DO IT: Set a barbell in a rack at about hip height. (See below for setup and device options.) You can go a little higher to make it easier when you want to get more reps, or lower to make it more challenging. Get beneath the bar and grab it overhand, with your hands about one and a half times shoulder width. Hang from the bar at arm's length, with your body straight and your weight resting on your heels. Pull your chest up to the bar. Pause, return to the starting position, and repeat.

TWO IMPORTANT FEATURES:

1 You can easily adjust your position from set to set, or even within a set. Let's say you begin a set and realize you aren't going to get as many reps as you wanted. You can move your feet closer to your torso to make them sure you hit your target. Or you can move your feet farther away to make it harder.

2 You can also work your back and arms in slightly different ways from one set to the next, or from workout to workout, by changing your grip and the angle of pull. More on that in a moment.



OPTION 1

In a gym, you can use the Smith machine for inverted rows, instead of occupying a squat rack.

OPTION 2

Suspension systems like the TRX—straps that you attach to an overhead support like a chinup bar—are another great option you'll find in many gyms. It's an equally good choice at home, if you have a sturdy point of attachment for the device.

OPTION 3

If you work out at home and the barbell setup isn't an option, you'll have to get creative. I've seen photos of home gyms that use a pair of crutches, set up on top of each other but facing opposite directions, resting on chairs or sawhorses. A ladder could work equally well, if you can find sturdy enough supports. You'll have to use a grip with your palms facing each other instead of overhand, but that's a small concession.

OPTION 4

You can widen your grip to put more emphasis on the upper-back muscles, including the rear delts and upper traps. Or you can use a narrower, underhand grip (as shown next) to preferentially emphasize the biceps and middle-back muscles.

OPTION 5

If you need to make it more challenging, you can raise your feet on a box or bench.

UPPER-BODY EXERCISES

Underhand-Grip Inverted Row

HOW TO DO IT: Grab the bar with an underhand, shoulder-width grip. Hang from the bar at arm's length, with your body straight and your weight resting on your heels. Pull your chest up to the bar. Pause, return to the starting position, and repeat.





SHOULDER PRESS VARIATIONS

■ In contrast to the bench press, you'll do a different shoulder-press variation in each stage. In part it's because many lifters have limited shoulder mobility, and struggle to lift weights straight overhead without bending backward and flaring out their ribcage. The other part is the opportunity to use the shoulder press as a Swiss army knife-like tool to work on balance, core strength, and shoulder stability while increasing the strength and size of the targeted muscles.



Dumbbell Shoulder Press

HOW TO DO IT: Grab a pair of dumbbells and stand holding them at the sides of your shoulders. You can turn your palms out or in toward each other; many find the latter feels more comfortable. It shouldn't make any major difference to your muscles. Set your feet shoulder-width apart, with your toes pointed forward and knees "soft"—that is, not locked. (You can also stand with one foot slightly in front of the other, which can be a better position for your lower back. Again, your shoulders won't know the difference.) Push the weights straight up over your shoulders. Lower them and repeat.

UPPER-BODY EXERCISES

Dumbbell Alternating Shoulder Press



HOW TO DO IT: Grab a pair of dumbbells and stand as described in the dumbbell shoulder press exercise. Press one overhead, and as you lower it, press the other. Continue alternating until you've completed all your reps with each arm.



Half-Kneeling One-Arm Shoulder Press

Now it gets fun. The half-kneeling position adds a balance and core-strength challenge, while pressing with a single arm ensures high-quality work.

HOW TO DO IT: Select a single dumbbell and kneel with your right knee on the floor or a padded surface. Lift the weight to your right shoulder and get your torso as straight and tall as possible, with your hips and shoulders square. You can rest your left hand on your left thigh or hip, or hold it out to the side for balance—whatever is most comfortable and allows for the best performance. Press the weight straight up from your shoulder. Lower it and do all your reps, then switch sides and repeat.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



■ **LOU SCHULER** is an award-winning journalist, a certified strength and conditioning specialist, and author or coauthor of many popular books about strength training, nutrition, and weight loss.

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