

why do we need warm-up sets in the first place?

1. they help you practice technique

lighter loads allow you to focus on your mechanics since you aren't focusing as much on grinding through a rep, whether you'll stand up with it or not. but, we still need to train with challenging loads to make progress.

warm-up sets provide a chance to practice at lighter loads in literally every lift session. not only does this help you perform better that day, as more repetition can help you repeat proper technique when the weight gets heavy, but also improves performance in the long run. practice generates improvement, and the same holds true for lifting.

2. warm-up reps increase body temperature, improve blood flow, & lubricate your joints

staying healthy and moving well is integral for long-term success in powerlifting. going straight to your top sets will not get you there.

lighter sets prepare you for the work to come, priming your body in the right state. they're called warm-ups for a reason, getting warm is necessary. by performing sub-maximal sets before your main work, you can do this in a way that's specific to your training rather than just jogging or biking. in turn, your working sets will feel much better, and you'll feel better, too.

3. warm-ups help you get into the right mental state

not only is physical prep work beneficial, but prepping your brain as you work up will equally impact performance.

gradually increasing weight helps you achieve your focus, get comfortable under the bar, and build confidence. when that final warm-up moves faster than you thought it would? you feel much better going into your first set.

warming up for your workout

the first thing we want to do when we get to the gym is get our muscles and joints primed. there are several ways to do this, and we recommend alternating different types of movements from one day to another in the warmup period. some things that can help get your body primed for your first compound lift include:

1. light cardio: start with 5-10 minutes of light cardio to increase your heart rate and get blood flow to the muscles. consider jogging, rowing, cycling, or even using an elliptical. the purpose here is to just get the blood flowing.

2. dynamic stretching: this is a great way to get your joints warmed up, and it'll also help with your balance and body control going into your first lift. some great dynamic stretching exercises include leg swings, arm circles, hip circles and lunges with a twist.

3. foam rolling/myofascial release: using a foam roller on your major muscle groups like quads, hamstrings, glutes, and back can help reduce tightness and increase blood flow. a few minutes of foam rolling can loosen you up and get you ready for your first compound lifts.

4. mobility work: this is always important, even for powerlifting, because mobility can help you avoid injury. strength in over-extended positions is extremely important for any sport. for mobility, focus on your ankles, hips, shoulders, and wrists.

compound lift warmup sets

there are no strict, across-the-board guidelines or percentages for this, leading to confusion around the topic. just know that everyone's body reacts differently, and lifters may execute warm-up sets differently. it doesn't need to be overly complicated, but it does take some experimentation. you may like taking bigger jumps, or doing more warm-up sets than an athlete next to you. and once you find your groove, you don't need to be in the gym strategically calculating the exact percentage of every set. with experience, you get an idea of how to go about the process.

it's relatively simple: start lighter and work your way up.

that said, here are some important guidelines for warming up properly:

1. while approaching your first set, your increases for the following warm-up will get smaller. (ex., you may

make a 50-70 lb jump between your first two warm-ups and only a 10-20 lb jump from your final warm-up to the first working set).

2. closer to your working sets, your rest times increase. you may not need to rest between your first couple of reps but should rest for a few minutes between your final ones.
3. the heavier your working sets, the more warm-ups you need. the lighter, the fewer warm-ups you need. for example, someone squatting 500 lbs needs far more preparation sets than someone squatting 100 lbs.
4. as you approach your first working set, reps decrease. you may start with five reps on your lighter sets and end with 1-3 for your final.
5. doing a couple of extra light sets (within the 50-70% range) can help if you're feeling particularly off, out of it, etc., on a given day. you can repeat your first few warm-ups if something feels wrong.
6. the goal is not to overexert yourself. warm-ups should be light, sub-maximal sets- otherwise, you'll risk suboptimal performance on the reps that matter, your working ones.
7. if your first set is a single, you should perform more singles and doubles as you get closer to your first set. if it's volume, you may use more triples and 5s.
8. 3-to 8 warm-up sets are generally adequate, again depending on how strong you are.
9. these guidelines pertain to sbd variations- you don't need to warm up for tricep pushdowns or leg extensions.

warm-up sets by percentages of max

warm-up set 1: start with the empty bar and warm up for a few reps there.

warm-up set 2: 40-50% of your first set x 5 reps (if the empty bar falls into this percentage- skip this step).

warm-up set 3: 60-65% of your first set x 3-5 reps

warm-up set 4: 70-80% of your first set x 3 reps

warm-up set 5: 85-90% of your first set x 1-3 reps

warm-up set 6: 90-95% of your first set x 1-3 reps

example: warming up to 225x5 squats

set 1: barx5 reps

set 2: 95 lbs x 5 reps

set 3: 135 lbs x 5 reps

set 4: 160 lbs x 5 reps

set 5: 180 lbs x 3 reps

set 6: 205 lbs x 3 reps

personalized warm-up routine example

let's say you want to warm up for your big bench press day. here's an example of a full warmup routine that will get you primed and ready for an incredible workout:

general workout warm-up:

1. light cardio (5 minutes): start with a quick 5-minute session of light cardiovascular exercise to get your heart rate up. this could be a brisk walk, light jogging on the treadmill, or a gentle spin on the bike. the goal is to increase blood flow without causing fatigue.
2. dynamic stretching (5 minutes): focus on upper body dynamic stretches to prepare your muscles and joints. include arm circles, band pull-aparts, and shoulder dislocations. these exercises enhance mobility and flexibility in your shoulders and chest.
3. activation exercises (5 minutes): engage and activate the muscles you'll be using during the bench press. do exercises like push-up variations (regular, incline, or knee push-ups) to warm up your chest, shoulders, and triceps. aim for low to moderate intensity to stimulate muscle activation without causing pre-exhaustion.

bench press specific warm-up sets:

1. set with just the bar (1x10-15 reps): begin with the bar alone to focus on form and technique. this set is about movement quality, not quantity or load. perform 10-15 reps to ensure your joints and muscles are acclimatized to the movement pattern.

2. light weight sets (2x5 reps): gradually add weight to the bar for a couple of sets of 5 reps each. these should be light enough to perform comfortably but heavy enough to continue increasing muscle activation and joint readiness. use weights that represent approximately 30-50% of your working set weight.
3. intermediate weight sets (2-3x3 reps): increase the weight on the bar to reach about 60-70% of your working set weight. perform 2-3 sets of 3 reps each. these sets are crucial for bridging the gap between your light warm-up sets and the heavier working sets.
4. working weight preparation (1-2x1-2 reps): approach your working set weight by performing 1-2 sets of 1-2 reps at 80-90% of the working weight. these sets are about priming your nervous system for the load to come without causing fatigue.
5. rest and assess: take a moment to assess how you're feeling. if something feels off, don't hesitate to adjust your working weights accordingly. listen to your body and ensure you're adequately prepared for your working sets.

key tips:

1. rest briefly (1-2 minutes) between warm-up sets to manage fatigue.
2. focus on form and technique throughout your warm-up, especially during the specific warm-up sets.
3. adjust the weights and reps based on how you're feeling on any given day. flexibility in your warm-up routine is crucial for addressing daily variations in energy and performance.

common mistakes during warm-ups

while it might seem as straightforward as lacing up your sneakers, there are pitfalls aplenty that can turn this overture into a bit of a comedy of errors. let's navigate the minefield together, shall we?

1. skipping the warm-up altogether: the cardinal sin! bypassing warm-up sets is like skipping the tutorial of a video game and wondering why you can't beat the first-level boss. warm-ups are essential, not optional. they prepare your body and mind for the epic saga of lifting that lies ahead.
2. overdoing it: here's the thing—your warm-up isn't the main event. it's the appetizer, not the entrée. treating it like a full workout can leave your muscles fatigued before you even hit your working sets. aim for a goldilocks zone of 'just right'—enough to get the blood flowing but not so much that you're breaking a sweat thinking about the actual workout.
3. under-warming up: conversely, a warm-up so brief it might as well be non-existent is equally problematic. if your warm-up is shorter than a commercial break, it's time to reassess. remember, we're prepping for a weightlifting session, not a sprint through the parking lot.
4. ignoring mobility and activation exercises: warm-ups aren't just about getting warm; they're about getting ready. ignoring mobility and muscle activation exercises is like ignoring half of your toolbox. tools like dynamic stretches and activation drills ensure you're not just warm but also limber and primed for action.
5. using too much weight, too soon: a common misstep is loading up the bar too early in the warm-up process. gradual progression is key. think of it as building a crescendo in music; you don't start at fortissimo. begin pianissimo with lighter weights and build up gradually to your working sets.
6. neglecting specific warm-ups for specific exercises: generic warm-ups are fine for a generic workout. but we're crafting masterpieces here. tailor your warm-up to the specific lifts you'll be performing. squat day? let's see some squat-specific warm-up action. bench press on the menu? time for some shoulder and chest activation.
7. not listening to your body: finally, the most egregious mistake of all—ignoring what your body is telling you. some days you're a well-oiled machine; other days, not so much. adjust your warm-up accordingly. your body's feedback is invaluable, so tune in.