

A bodyweight workout: no equipment, full body, at home

A floor, a chair and a doorway are enough to start, and to build muscle for longer than most people think. Here's the plan, with easier and harder versions.

Short answer: Train the whole body two or three times a week with five patterns: a squat, a hinge, a push, a pull and a core move. Use the version of each you can do for 8 to 20 good reps, stop each set with a few reps left, and move to a harder version once 20 gets easy.

By Diogo · Updated October 25, 2026 · 6 min read

No gym, no dumbbells, no problem, at least for the first months. The limit at home isn't the equipment. It's that bodyweight sets only work when they're hard, and the plan has to keep making them harder.

This page is that plan: five movement patterns, an easier and a harder version of each, how many sets and reps, how to progress without weights, and when it's time to buy something. It's written for a beginner with a floor, a chair and a doorway. If you already own dumbbells, [the dumbbell workout plan](#) is the next step up. If you'd rather start in a gym, [the first four weeks](#) is the page for that.

Does bodyweight training build muscle?

Yes, if the sets are hard enough. A 2017 review of 21 studies found that light loads (60 percent of your one-rep max or less) and heavy loads built similar amounts of muscle when every set was taken to failure; heavy loads did better only for one-rep-max strength.¹ The American College of Sports Medicine's 2026 position stand found that the load, anywhere from 30 to 100 percent of a one-rep max, didn't change muscle growth,² and found that home-based resistance training improved strength, muscular endurance and balance.²

Push-ups have been tested against the bench press. In an eight-week study, 18 untrained young men did either bench presses at 40 percent of their one-rep max or push-ups with their body position adjusted to the same load: three sets to failure, twice a week. Both groups gained similar chest and triceps thickness and similar bench press strength.³ In a 2018 four-week study of 23 moderately trained men, push-up training that moved through harder variations raised bench press one-rep max, just as bench pressing did.⁴

The catch is effort. In an eight-week study of 25 untrained men doing one-leg knee extensions, a light load (30 percent of one-rep max) built muscle when sets went to failure, about 34 reps, and showed no significant growth when sets stopped at about 20. The heavy load built muscle either way, and built more strength.⁵ At home you can't just add weight, so effort and the version you choose have to do the work a heavier dumbbell would.

The plan: calisthenics for beginners, five patterns, full body

The authors of the ACSM stand suggest that upper- and lower-body pushing and pulling is enough to cover the major muscle groups.² A squat is the lower-body push, a hinge the lower-body pull, a push-up the upper-body push and a row the upper-body pull. Add a [core move](#) and that's the session.

Pattern	Easier	Standard	Harder
Squat	Sit-to-stand from a chair	Bodyweight squat	Split squat or reverse lunge , then with the back foot up on a couch
Hinge	Glute bridge	Single-leg glute bridge	Single-leg hip thrust, shoulders on the couch
Push	Push-up, hands on a kitchen counter	Push-up from the floor (knees down while you build up)	Push-up with your feet up on a step or the couch; bench dips for the triceps
Pull	Doorframe row: hold both sides of a sturdy doorframe, lean back, pull yourself in	The same row, feet closer to the frame so you lean back further	One-arm doorframe row, or a bent-over row with a backpack full of books
Core	Dead bug	Plank	Side plank, or a plank with your hands further forward

Pick the version of each where you can do at least eight good reps. Test the doorframe and anything you stand or lean on before you trust it with your weight.

The week: all five patterns, two or three times a week, on days that aren't back to back. That covers the World Health Organization's guideline of muscle-strengthening work for all major muscle groups on two or more days a week.⁶ ([Rest days](#) explains how to space them.)

The session: one easy warm-up set of the squat and the push-up at about half your reps, then squat, push, hinge, pull and core, resting about a minute between sets. It runs thirty to forty minutes. Short on time? Pair the push with the pull and the hinge with the core, the way [the 30-minute workout](#) does.

The pull is the weak spot. Without a bar or a band, it's the hardest pattern to load, which is why it's usually the first thing worth buying for (more on that below).

Sets, reps and how hard

- **Weeks 1 and 2:** two sets of each, stopping with three or four reps left. The job is learning the movements.
- **From week 3:** three sets, stopping with one to three reps left. ([Here's how to judge reps left.](#)) The ACSM stand says going all the way to failure isn't required.²
- **Reps:** 8 to 20 a set. Fewer than eight good reps, use the easier version. More than twenty with reps to spare, move to the harder one.

Reps left are harder to judge in long sets. A 2022 review of 12 studies and 414 participants found people guessed their reps to failure less accurately when sets ran past twelve reps, and that they tended to underestimate how many they had left.⁷ So check your guess now and then: on a push-up or a squat, take the last set until you can't do another good rep, and compare that with what you thought you had.

How to progress without weights

Progress at home works the way it does with a barbell: ask for a little more over time. You can't add a plate, so you add something else, roughly in this order:

1. **Add reps** until you reach twenty on every set. In a 2022 eight-week study of 43 trained lifters, adding reps at the same weight built muscle and strength about as well as adding weight; the authors call both viable ways to progress.⁸
2. **Add a set**, up to three a pattern. The ACSM stand ties ten or more sets per muscle group a week to more muscle growth;² three sessions of three sets gives nine sets per movement, close to that mark.
3. **Slow the lowering** to three or four seconds, or pause for two at the bottom. It isn't magic: the ACSM stand found fast and slow reps built similar muscle.² It just makes a set hard in fewer reps.
4. **Move to the harder version** and drop back toward eight reps. Raising your feet, or kneeling, changes how much of your weight a push-up moves,³ and one leg instead of two does the same for a squat or a bridge. The 2018 push-up study of 23 moderately trained men progressed this way, through harder variations.⁴
5. **Write it down.** The version, the reps and how many you had left, for every set. You can't add a rep to a number you don't remember.

[Progressive overload, explained](#) covers the idea in full.

When to add equipment

- **Your pull is stuck.** If the doorframe row is easy at twenty reps, or you don't have a frame you trust, equip the pull first: [a resistance band anchored in a door](#), or a pull-up bar. The ACSM stand found elastic-band training improved strength and muscle size compared with no training.²
- **The hardest version you can do well runs past twenty reps.** Sets get long, slow and harder to judge,⁷ and added load is the simpler lever.
- **You want maximal strength.** Heavier loads build more one-rep-max strength than light ones,^{1,5} and the ACSM stand links bigger strength gains to loads of 80 percent of one-rep max or more.²

The usual next step is a pair of adjustable dumbbells, and [the dumbbell workout plan](#) keeps the same patterns and adds load. If something hurts (not sore, hurts), or you have an injury or a medical condition, check with a doctor or physical therapist before you push any of this harder.

If you want it written for you

This plan is the same for everyone, which means it isn't written for your living room or your week. Coaching is the version where your workouts live in the Trainerize app, built around the days you actually have, and a weekly call looks at the week you just had and rebuilds the next one. [Coaching for beginners](#) explains how the first weeks work, and [applying](#) takes about two minutes. Otherwise: clear a space on the floor and do the first session today.

Sources

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