

A full-body workout plan: three days a week in the gym

Three gym sessions a week, six movements each, and a rule for adding weight. Here's the plan, with a two-day version for bad weeks.

Short answer: Three full-body gym sessions a week, about an hour each, six movements per session: a squat, a hinge, a push, a pull, one extra and a core move. Three sets of eight to twelve, stopping two or three reps short of failure, resting about two minutes on the big lifts. Add weight whenever you hit twelve on every set.

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Three days a week in a gym is the week most people actually have, and it's enough to run a complete strength program for years. The catch is that a lot of three-day plans are written as if the week were six: a chest day, a back day, a leg day, and three muscle groups that never get trained. Full body fixes that. Every session trains everything, so a missed day costs you a third of the week, not a whole muscle.

This page is the plan: three sessions, six movements each, the sets, reps and rest, and the rule for adding weight. It's written for a gym with a rack, a bench, a cable stack and dumbbells. Never lifted before? [The first four weeks](#) comes first and explains the ideas behind every rule here; this page is where you go after it. Training at home? [The dumbbell plan](#) is the same layout with a pair of dumbbells.

Why three full-body days

The research on how to divide a week is unusually clear. The American College of Sports Medicine's 2026 position stand, a review of 137 systematic reviews, makes lifting with high effort at least twice a week, with all major muscle groups trained, its primary recommendation.¹ A 2024 meta-analysis of 14 studies and 392 participants found that split and full-body routines built similar strength and muscle when the weekly volume was matched.² And a 2019 meta-analysis of 25 studies found that how often a muscle was trained made no meaningful difference to its growth once the weekly volume was equated.³

So the layout is a question of fit, not physiology, and three full-body days fit most weeks: a day off between sessions, every muscle trained three times, and nothing lost if Friday falls through. ([Which split for your days](#) compares the layouts; this page is the full-body one, written out.)

What you need

- **A gym** with a squat rack or a leg press, a bench, a cable stack and dumbbells. Every slot has a machine or dumbbell option for when the rack is taken.
- **About an hour, three times a week**, on days you can repeat, with at least a day between them. Monday, Wednesday, Friday is the classic; Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday works the same.

- **A log.** Weight and reps for every set, in your phone or a notebook (a [layout you can copy](#)). The progression rule below only works if you know what you did last time.
- **Working weights you already know**, or a first week spent finding them. [How much weight to lift](#) covers that.

The plan: three days, six movements each

Every session has the same six slots: a squat, a [hinge](#), a push, a pull, one extra and a core move, with the heaviest lift first (on Day C that's the deadlift, so it goes before the squat). The exercises rotate across the three days, so each slot sees three variations a week and nothing gets stale. The big lifts go first: the ACSM's 2009 position stand recommends that strength programs order a session so the large muscle groups and multi-joint exercises come before the small and single-joint ones.⁴

Day A

1. **Back squat**, or the [leg press](#) if the rack is busy
2. **Romanian deadlift**, barbell or dumbbells
3. **Bench press**
4. **Lat pulldown** or pull-ups
5. **Lateral raises**, light
6. **Plank**, as long as the position stays good

Day B

1. **Front squat** or hack squat
2. **Hip thrust**
3. **Overhead press**
4. **Seated cable row**
5. **Arms**: a curl and a triceps pushdown, one after the other ([the arm workout](#) picks them)
6. **Dead bug**, slow ([the core workout](#) has swaps)

Day C

1. **Deadlift**, conventional or trap bar
2. **Goblet squat** or Bulgarian split squat
3. **Incline dumbbell press**
4. **One-arm dumbbell row**
5. **Face pulls**
6. **Suitcase carry**, one heavy dumbbell, switch hands halfway ([how to carry](#))

Sets, reps, rest and effort

Sets and reps: three sets of eight to twelve on every exercise, two sets in week one while you find the weights. The ACSM's 2009 position stand recommends loads in the 8 to 12 repetition-maximum range for people new to lifting and, for building muscle, loads from 1 to 12 RM with the emphasis on the 6 to 12

zone.⁴ Lateral raises, face pulls and the carry run to fifteen. From week five, the first lift of each day gets heavier; that's in the progression below.

Rest: about two minutes after the squat, hinge and press, about ninety seconds after the rest. A 2018 systematic review of 23 studies and 491 participants found that short to moderate rests of 60 to 120 seconds were enough to maximize strength gains in untrained people, with rests of more than two minutes needed in trained lifters.⁵ For muscle growth, a 2024 Bayesian meta-analysis of nine studies found a small benefit from resting more than sixty seconds and no clear difference beyond ninety.⁶ (Rest between sets, in more detail.)

Effort: every set stops with two or three good reps left in you, three or four in the first two weeks. A 2022 meta-analysis of 15 studies in young adults found that training to failure wasn't required for strength or muscle gains, and didn't hurt them either.⁷ A 2024 series of exploratory meta-regressions found strength gains similar across a wide range of reps in reserve, with muscle growth improving as sets ended closer to failure.⁸ Two or three left is close enough to grow and far enough to keep your form and your next set. (How to judge reps left.)

Warm-up: two lighter sets of the first lift, at about half and then three-quarters of the working weight. A 2021 review of time-efficient training found little support for a general warm-up when time is short, but says warm-up sets of the exercise itself can be useful, particularly before heavy loads.⁹ (The full warm-up, for longer days.)

A session runs fifty to sixty minutes. Sore after the first week? That's common when a kind of exercise is new to you, and the standard advice is to ease into it over a week or two rather than push through.¹⁰ (Whether to train through it.)

What this adds up to in a week

Three sessions of three sets is nine direct sets a week for each of the squat, hinge, push and pull patterns, before the sets the other exercises add on the side: a row works the biceps, a press works the triceps and the front of the shoulders. The ACSM's 2026 review found muscle growth enhanced by ten or more sets per muscle group a week, and the meta-regression it cites showed diminishing returns beyond about 18 to 20 weekly sets.¹ Nine direct sets plus the indirect ones lands most muscles in that range. The 2021 time-efficiency review's floor is lower, at least four sets per muscle group a week,⁹ which is why the two-day version below is still a real program. (Counting sets per week, explained.)

The eight-week progression

Week 1: find the weights

Two sets of everything, three or four reps in reserve, every set written down. The job is to leave each session knowing what every exercise feels like at a weight you could repeat.

Weeks 2 to 4: three sets, add the smallest amount

Three sets from week two. Whenever you hit twelve reps on every set with two or three to spare, add weight next time: the ACSM's guidance is a 2 to 10 percent increase once you can do one or two reps more than your target.⁴ On a barbell that's the smallest plates; on dumbbells, the next pair; on a machine, one pin. Where you didn't hit twelve, repeat the weight.

Weeks 5 to 8: heavier on the first lift

The first lift of each day (the back squat, the front squat, the deadlift) moves to three sets of six to eight with a heavier weight and a full two to three minutes of rest. The ACSM's 2026 review found strength enhanced by heavier loads, lifted through a full range of motion, for two to three sets, at the beginning of the session, at least twice a week,¹ which is what those three lifts now get. Everything else keeps the eight-to-twelve rule.

After week 8: keep it, or change one thing

If the log still shows weights going up, keep going; the plan has years in it. If several lifts have stalled for three weeks, take a [deload week](#), then swap one exercise inside its slot, not the structure. ([Progressive overload, explained](#), has the other levers.) Got a fourth day most weeks? [The upper/lower plan](#) is the next step, and the split guide covers [switching without losing progress](#).

The two-day version for bad weeks

Drop Day C and run A and B, at least a day apart, last week's weights, two sets each. Two sessions a week is still the World Health Organization's floor for adults, muscle-strengthening activities on two or more days a week,¹¹ and the ACSM's primary recommendation above. If the week can only hold one session, do one: the WHO guidelines say some physical activity is better than none.¹¹ What you don't do is skip the week and restart from zero.

Five rules that keep this going

- **Same plan for at least eight weeks.** Swap an exercise inside its slot if you must; don't rewrite the structure.
- **Write everything down.** The plan is the logbook.
- **Add the smallest amount.** One plate, one rep. Never a big jump because you felt good.
- **Do the session you missed, not the one the calendar says.** A, B, C in order, whatever day it is.
- **If it hurts, stop and ask.** Sharp pain is not soreness. If you have an injury, a medical condition or a medical question, talk to your doctor before you start. I'm a fitness coach, not a doctor.

Common questions

Is a full-body plan good for beginners?

Yes, and it's where most people should start. If you've never lifted, run [the first four weeks](#) first; it's a lighter version of this layout with the same slots and two sets instead of three.

Full body or a split?

When the weekly sets are matched, the research above finds similar results, so pick by days: full body for two or three, upper/lower for four, push/pull/legs for five or six. [The split guide](#) has the comparison.

Can you run this at home?

With dumbbells, [the dumbbell plan](#) is this layout written for a pair; with nothing, [the bodyweight workout](#).

How long does each session take?

Fifty to sixty minutes with the rests above. Short on time? [The 30-minute workout](#) keeps the four big movements and pairs them.

If you want it written for your week

This plan is for everyone, so it isn't written for your Tuesdays, your gym's busy hours or the lifts you'd rather skip. Coaching is the version where your workouts live in the Trainerize app, the exercises fit your gym, the days fit your week, and someone reads the logbook weekly and changes what needs changing. [Coaching to build muscle](#) explains how that works, and [apply](#) tells me about your week. Otherwise: book three days, load the bar light, and do Day A.

General education only, not medical advice. If you have a medical condition, are pregnant, or take medication, check with your doctor before changing how you train or eat.

Sources

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