

A home gym workout plan: three days with a rack, a bar and a bench

A rack, a bar, plates and a bench in a garage or a spare room are enough for a complete strength program. Most plans are written for a commercial gym full of machines. This one uses only what a basic home gym has: three full-body days, a dumbbell version of every slot, what to buy first, and a rule for adding weight in small steps.

Short answer: Train three full-body days a week, each with a squat, a hinge, a push, a pull and a core move, heaviest lift first. Do three sets of six to twelve, stopping two or three reps short of failure, and add the smallest weight step once you beat the top of the range. Squat and bench inside the rack with the safety arms set, because nobody is there to spot you.

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A home gym takes away the trip, the wait for the rack and the hour you lose getting there and back. What it doesn't come with is a plan. Most plans are written for a commercial gym, with a leg press, a cable stack and a row of machines, and they fall apart in a garage with one bar and one bench.

This plan is written for the garage. It assumes a basic home gym: a barbell with plates, a rack or squat stands, and a bench, or a pair of adjustable dumbbells and a bench. Every slot has a barbell version and a dumbbell version. If your home gym is only dumbbells, [the dumbbell workout plan](#) is the fuller program for that; with no equipment at all, [the bodyweight workout](#); in a commercial gym, [the full-body workout plan](#). Never lifted before? [The first four weeks](#) covers the basics, and this page picks up from there.

What a basic home gym needs, in order

You don't need much. A 2021 review of time-efficient training says that, because they are versatile and need relatively little space, free weights are the better buy when you set up a home gym.¹ And the American College of Sports Medicine's 2026 position stand found strength gains were not affected by whether people trained with free weights or machines.² So the order below is free weights first, then the pieces that widen what they can do. These are kinds of equipment, not models: buy what fits your space.

1. **The core.** A barbell and enough plates for your squat and deadlift, a power rack or squat stands with safety arms, and a sturdy flat bench. Or, if space is tight, adjustable dumbbells and a bench: everything in the plan below has a dumbbell version.
2. **A way to pull vertically.** A pull-up bar, on the rack or in a doorway, plus a resistance band for assisted reps until you can do them unassisted. ([How to get your first pull-up.](#))
3. **The other half of the free weights.** If you started with the bar, add adjustable dumbbells for rows, presses and split squats; if you started with dumbbells, add a bar and plates once the dumbbells run out of weight.

4. **Small steps.** Small plates, so a bar can go up by less than the smallest standard plate pair. In a home gym they are what keeps progress going (more on that below).
5. **Nice to have.** A bench that inclines, flooring that protects the floor and the plates, and a band or two for warm-ups and rows.

The plan: three full-body days

Three days, A, B and C, with at least a day between them: Monday, Wednesday, Friday, or any three you can repeat. Each day has five slots: a squat, a [hinge](#), a push, a pull and a core move. The heaviest lift goes first (on Day B that's the deadlift, so the hinge leads): the ACSM's 2009 position stand recommends ordering a session with large-muscle and multi-joint exercises before the small and single-joint ones.³ The barbell version is first in each cell; the dumbbell version follows.

Slot	Day A	Day B	Day C
First lift	Back squat. Dumbbells: goblet squat	Deadlift. Dumbbells: Romanian deadlift	Front squat or box squat. Dumbbells: goblet squat
Second lower	Romanian deadlift, barbell or dumbbells	Bulgarian split squat, dumbbells in both versions	Hip thrust, barbell or one dumbbell
Push	Bench press. Dumbbells: dumbbell bench press	Overhead press. Dumbbells: dumbbell shoulder press	Incline press if the bench inclines, otherwise push-ups
Pull	Pull-ups, band-assisted if needed	Barbell row. Dumbbells: one-arm dumbbell row	Inverted row under a bar set low in the rack, or chin-ups
Core	Plank	Dead bug	Suitcase carry with one heavy dumbbell (how to carry)

Sets, reps and effort: three sets of each. On the first lift of the day, six to ten reps; on everything else, eight to twelve. In your first two weeks, two sets. Every set stops with two or three good reps still in you ([how to judge reps left](#)). The ACSM's 2009 stand puts the emphasis for muscle growth on loads you can lift six to twelve times, with one to two minutes between sets;³ rest the full two minutes after the first lift and about ninety seconds after the rest. A session runs about fifty minutes.

What that adds up to: three sets in every slot, three days a week, so the push and the pull each get nine hard sets a week, and the legs and hips eighteen across the two lower slots. The 2021 time-efficiency review's floor is at least four weekly sets per muscle group, in loads you can lift six to fifteen times;¹ this plan clears it with room for the weeks you miss a day.

Training alone: the rack is your spotter

In a home gym there is usually nobody to take the bar off you. So the squat and the bench press always happen inside the rack, with the safety arms set just below the lowest point of the rep: low enough that a good rep never touches them, high enough to catch the bar if you can't finish one. If your rack has no safety arms, keep the barbell squat and bench press two or three reps short of failure on every set without exception, or do the dumbbell versions, which you can simply set down. Warm up into each lift with a few lighter sets of the same exercise; the 2021 review recommends exercise-specific warm-ups rather than long, general ones.¹ ([How to warm up before lifting.](#))

Progression: small steps, written down

When you can do one or two more reps than the top of your range on every set, add weight next session. The ACSM's 2009 stand puts that step at 2 to 10 percent more load once you can do one or two reps over your target.³ ([Progressive overload, explained.](#))

A home gym has one problem a commercial gym doesn't: the steps can be big. The smallest plates you own decide the smallest jump, and adjustable dumbbells often jump further than that. Two ways around it:

- **Add reps before weight.** Climb from the bottom of the range to the top, one rep at a time, then make the jump and start at the bottom again.
- **Buy small plates before anything new.** They are the piece of equipment that keeps the bar moving up.

Keep a log of every set: weight, reps, and how many you had left. A 2016 meta-analysis of 138 studies, about goals in general rather than lifting, found that monitoring progress helped people reach their goals, and helped more when the progress was physically recorded.⁴ ([A workout log you can copy.](#))

The floor for bad weeks

Some weeks only hold two sessions. Do Day A and Day B and pick up with Day C next week. Two days is still the dose that counts: the ACSM's 2026 stand makes lifting with high effort at least twice a week, with all major muscle groups trained, its primary recommendation,² and two or more days a week of muscle-strengthening activity is the World Health Organization's guideline for adults.⁵

Some weeks only hold one. Then it's one session, every slot, one or two sets each, at your usual weights. A 2021 review of the least training needed to hold on to performance found strength and muscle size could be maintained for up to 32 weeks, at least in younger people, with as little as one session a week and one set per exercise, as long as the load stayed heavy for the person lifting it.⁶ Lighter is not the floor; less is.

Five rules for a home gym

- **Book it like an appointment.** The gym is twenty steps away, which makes it easy to skip. Same days, same time.
- **Safety arms on, every heavy set.** Squat and bench inside the rack.
- **Small plates before new toys.** Progress stalls on the size of the jump long before it stalls on the equipment.
- **Log every set.** At home nobody else remembers what you lifted last week.
- **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 a doctor before you start. I'm a fitness coach, not a doctor.

Common questions

Is a home gym enough to build muscle and strength?

The equipment isn't what limits most people. The ACSM's 2026 stand found strength was not affected by free weights versus machines, and that muscle growth did not depend on whether the loads were light, around 30 percent of a one-rep max, or as heavy as a one-rep max.² A bar, plates and a bench can run this

plan for a long time; the log and the small plates do the rest.

What should I buy first?

A bar, plates, a rack with safety arms and a flat bench, or adjustable dumbbells and a bench if space is tight. Then a pull-up bar, then small plates. The list above has the order.

Can I run this with only dumbbells?

Yes: use the dumbbell version in every cell. If the dumbbells are all you'll ever own, [the dumbbell workout plan](#) is written for exactly that, with six movements a session.

I have no pull-up bar yet. What do I do for the pull?

One-arm dumbbell rows on Day A, and inverted rows under the bar set low in the rack on Day C. A band row with the band anchored in a door also works ([the band workout](#) shows how).

How many days a week?

Three, with two as the floor in a bad week and one as the floor in a terrible one. Four free days? [The upper/lower split](#) is the four-day plan; use the barbell and dumbbell versions from the table above where it calls for a machine.

If you want it written for your equipment

A plan on a web page can't see your garage. Coaching is the version where your workouts live in the Trainerize app, built around the equipment you actually own and the jumps your plates allow, and a weekly call looks at your log and changes what needs changing. [Coaching for strength](#) explains how that works, and [apply](#) tells me about your setup. Otherwise: set the safety arms, 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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