

How to start lifting weights: the first four weeks

No perfect program needed: six movements, two or three short sessions a week, and a rule for adding weight. Here's the first month.

Short answer: Start with two or three full-body sessions a week built from six movements: a squat, a hinge, a push, a pull, a carry or core move, and a machine you like. Two sets each, three or four reps in reserve, and add a little when the top of the range feels easy.

By Diogo · Updated October 26, 2026 · 6 min read

Most people who want to start lifting don't start. They research splits for three weeks, buy a program built for someone who's been training for years, get crushed in session one and quietly stop. The first month of lifting isn't about the perfect program. It's about getting through four weeks without getting hurt, lost or bored.

Here's how I'd do it. If the gym itself is the scary part, read [your first day, step by step](#) first; this page picks up from the first workout.

Start with six movements, not sixty

Almost everything a beginner needs is covered by six patterns. Pick one exercise for each, ideally a machine or a dumbbell version you can learn in one session:

1. **A squat:** leg press, [goblet squat](#), a box squat or a [reverse lunge](#). (Heels lifting? [Ankle mobility](#) covers why.)
2. **A hinge:** a Romanian deadlift with light dumbbells, or a hip thrust. ([Squat form](#) and [deadlift form](#) walk through these first two step by step.)
3. **A push:** chest-press machine, push-ups (on an incline if needed) or a dumbbell press. (After the first month, [the chest workout](#) and [the shoulder workout](#) build on this one.)
4. **A pull:** seated row or lat pulldown.
5. **Something for your core:** a plank or a dead bug. (Later on, [the core workout](#) builds on these two.)
6. **One thing you like:** a machine like [the chest fly](#), a [cable curl](#), [calves](#). Enjoyment is a training variable too.

That's a full-body session. Do it two or three times a week on days you can repeat. (Training at home with a pair of dumbbells? [Here's the three-day dumbbell version of this plan.](#)) You don't need a split yet; [how often to train](#) covers when a split starts to make sense. When you're ready, [which workout split](#) compares the options. The American College of Sports Medicine's 2026 position stand says even "minimal doses" of lifting bring substantial strength gains,¹ so a short session that happens beats a long one that doesn't.

How heavy: too easy is correct

Two sets of eight to twelve reps per exercise, and every set stops with three or four reps still in you. (Finding that weight: [how much weight to lift](#).) If you finish a set and think "I could have done more", that's the plan working. Before the first exercise, [warm up like this](#).

Two reasons. First, heavy or light matters less than people think: a 2017 meta-analysis of 21 studies found that light and heavy loads built similar amounts of muscle when sets were taken to failure, while heavy loads were better for one-rep-max strength.² You don't need to go heavy to grow; you need to be consistent. Second, beginners are the people least able to judge how many reps they have left. Research keeps finding that lifters underestimate how many reps remain, especially when a set is far from failure, and that the skill improves with experience.^{3,4} So "three or four reps left" is a guess at first. Guess easy. ([Here's how reps in reserve works](#).)

The first four weeks

Week 1: learn the movements

Two sessions. Light weights, two sets each, and the job is to leave feeling like you did too little. Write down the weight and reps for every set, in your phone or on paper. You will be sore afterward; soreness is common when you're first introduced to a kind of activity, and a 2003 review of the research advises easing into new exercise over a week or two.⁵ That's why week one is easy on purpose.

Week 2: repeat, and add a little

Same six exercises, so they start to feel familiar. Wherever the top of your rep range felt easy, add the smallest jump the machine or dumbbell rack allows. Where it didn't, repeat. Two sessions again, or three if your week has room.

Week 3: a third set, or a third day

Pick one: add a third set to each exercise, or add a third session. Not both. One change a week is how you know what's working. If a lift feels off, swap the exercise, not the whole plan.

Week 4: notice it

By now the weights have gone up on most lifts, you know where the water fountain is, and the session takes forty minutes instead of an hour of wandering. Muscle is already changing too, just not enough to see: in a 2007 study using a high-intensity program, measurable increases in muscle size showed up after only about three weeks,⁶ and a 2011 study that scanned new lifters weekly found real growth became clear around weeks three and four and kept climbing from there.⁷ Strength moves first. The mirror catches up later. (On a class schedule? [The college workout routine](#) takes this plan through a whole semester, exam weeks included.)

Five rules that keep beginners lifting

- **Same exercises for at least four weeks.** Progress needs repetition. Novelty is the enemy of a beginner's first month.
- **Write everything down.** You can't add a little if you don't know what you did. An app, a notebook, the notes on your phone. ([What to write](#).)

- **Add the smallest amount.** A rep, a set, the next plate on the stack. Never a big jump because you felt good. ([Progressive overload, explained simply.](#))
- **Never miss twice.** One missed session is life. Two in a row is the start of quitting. The next one happens no matter what.
- **If it hurts, stop and ask.** Sharp pain is not soreness. A staff member can check a machine; a doctor or physical therapist checks you.

Common questions

How many days a week should a beginner lift?

Two or three full-body sessions, on days you can repeat. No split yet.

How heavy should a beginner go?

Light enough that every set stops with three or four reps still in you.

How should you breathe when lifting?

Breathe out as you push the weight and in as you lower it, the pattern a 2025 bench press study calls the most commonly recommended one.⁸ Avoid the reverse: in that study of 12 trained men, breathing in while pressing meant fewer completed sets and less total weight than breathing out or holding the breath, and in a 2021 study of 24 healthy men testing a one-rep max bench press, breathing in on the way up lowered the weight lifted.^{8,9} On heavy sets, some lifters instead hold their breath and brace through the hard part to stabilize the trunk, as in [the squat setup](#), then breathe out at the top.¹⁰ It does add strain: in a 2026 study of 17 healthy young women squatting with body weight or a weighted vest at low-to-moderate intensity, holding the breath raised heart rate and systolic blood pressure more than breathing out steadily did, though the authors judged the rise non-critical for healthy young women.¹⁰ If you have a heart or blood-pressure condition, ask your doctor how to breathe when you lift.

When to get help, and what kind

You can do the first four weeks alone with this page. Two situations where help pays for itself early: if you feel unsafe lifting without someone beside you, a few sessions with a trainer at your gym first is a smart move. Supervision is real: in a twelve-week study from 2000, men who trained under a trainer's supervision increased their loads faster and gained more maximal strength than men who trained on their own.¹¹ And if you've started before and drifted off by week three, the missing piece usually isn't information. It's structure and someone who notices. That's what [coaching for beginners](#) is built for: the program tells you what to do and in what order, and I teach you the why and the technique as we go.

Coaching is written up [for women](#) and [for men](#) too, if you want the plan built for you; [strength training for women](#) covers what the studies in women found.

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.

Otherwise: pick your six movements, book two days this week, and go do too little. That's the whole first step. (Wondering how many people around you lift at all? [The CDC's numbers, state by state.](#))

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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