

Machine-only workout plan: a full-body routine for the gym

A leg press, a few presses and pulls, and a repeatable week. Use this sample when you want a complete gym session without a barbell or dumbbells.

Short answer: Use a leg press, leg curl, chest press, seated row, lat pulldown, shoulder press and abdominal machine. Start with two sessions on nonconsecutive days; use the sample sets, reps and progression rules below.

By Diogo · Published October 28, 2026 · 6 min read

This is a **sample routine for healthy adults**, not an individualized prescription or a routine tested as a whole in a study. You need access to several machines. If your gym has just one adjustable cable station, use [the single-station cable workout](#). If you want a mix of machines and free weights, use [the full-body A/B/C plan](#).

How many days should you train?

Start with two days you can repeat, such as Monday and Thursday. The American College of Sports Medicine's **2026 public guidance** recommends training all major muscle groups at least twice weekly and adapting the program to the person.¹ That supports the general approach; it does not validate this exact list of exercises, sets or reps.

Available days	Example week	What to do
Two	Monday and Thursday	Repeat the session below on both days.
Three	Monday, Wednesday and Friday	Optional: repeat the same session, with a day between sessions. Keep the two-day version if the extra day is hard to recover from or maintain.
One this week	Your next available day	Do one session and resume the normal schedule when you can. It is a smaller week, not an equivalent dose.

You do not need three different sessions just because you have three days. Repeating this list is the sample's rule, not a claim that it is the best split for everyone. The [workout-plan guide](#) has other schedules.

Do you have to use free weights?

No barbell or dumbbell is required for this routine. A 2023 review compared machine and free-weight training in adults aged 18–60. It found no statistically significant difference in muscle growth in the five studies that measured it; strength results depended on the exercise used to test them.² That is not proof

that every machine program is equivalent to every free-weight program, or that a machine is automatically safer.

If your goal includes a particular barbell lift, this plan does not teach that lift. Choose your equipment around what you want to practise and what you can use consistently.

The full-body machine-only session

The sets below are **working sets**, after your light practice sets. These are practical starting choices for this sample, not a dose taken from a trial of this routine. Use controlled reps and stop with about two or three good reps left. Rest about two minutes between working sets, or longer if you need it to repeat the movement with control. [Reps in reserve](#) explains how to judge the effort.

Exercise	Working sets × reps	Setup help
Leg press	2 × 8–12	Leg press guide ; get the safety-stop demonstration for your model.
Seated or lying leg curl	2 × 8–12	Leg curl guide .
Chest press machine	2 × 8–12	Chest press machine guide .
Seated row machine or seated cable row	2 × 8–12	Cable-row guide for that version; ask staff about a fixed machine's adjustments.
Lat pulldown	2 × 8–12	Lat pulldown guide .
Shoulder press machine	2 × 8–12	Follow that model's placard and have staff show you the seat, starting position and adjustments.
Abdominal crunch machine	2 × 10–15	Use that machine's instructions; the cable alternative is below.

Check that the gym has these stations before choosing this plan. A label saying “press” is not enough to identify the exercise. Ask staff to show you an unfamiliar machine, including its adjustments and stops. A machine's fixed path does not mean every body fits it. Stop if a movement causes pain; persistent symptoms need a clinician, not a different internet routine.

Your first visit: find repeatable settings and weights

1. **Learn the machine before loading it.** Read its instructions and get a demonstration if you have not used it. Record the seat and pad settings that fit you.
2. **Use a light practice set.** Start lighter than you expect to need. This set helps you learn the movement; it is not one of the working sets in the table.
3. **Choose a working weight you can control.** Use the lower end of the range with a few good reps left. If you cannot complete it without changing the movement, lower the weight.
4. **Write down what happened.** Record the machine, its settings, the weight and the reps in each set. The [free workout log](#) has space for this.

Weight-stack numbers are records for that particular machine. Do not use the same printed number as a target when you switch models. Find a controlled working weight again.

When should you increase the weight?

Use this sample's rule: add reps within the listed range before adding weight. For an 8–12 exercise, a log might go from 10 and 9 reps to 11 and 10, then eventually 12 and 12. Once both sets reach the top with the same controlled movement and a few reps left, try the smallest available increase at the next session.

If that increase takes you below the bottom of the range, return to the previous load. Do not force the jump by shortening the reps. The same rule applies to the abdominal machine's 10–15 range. [Progressive overload](#) covers other ways a plan can progress.

For example, 12 and 12 is a reason to consider increasing the load; 12 and 7 is a reason to keep working at the current load or reduce it. These are examples of the rule, not targets you have to reach on a deadline.

What if a machine is busy or missing?

Situation	Practical option	Keep the distinction
A station is occupied	Do another listed exercise, then return.	Do not reserve several machines at once. Log any order change.
Only one leg-curl style is available	Use the seated or lying version you have learned.	Find its settings and working weight again.
No fixed seated row	Use the seated cable row.	It is a cable exercise; learn that setup before treating it as a swap.
No abdominal crunch machine	Use the kneeling cable crunch if you know the setup.	This changes the position and movement; it is not the same machine.
No leg press, chest press or shoulder press you can use	Choose the cable session or mixed-equipment plan if that equipment fits your gym.	Choose a complete alternative rather than inventing an unfamiliar substitute mid-session.

A leg extension alone is not the whole leg-press slot, and a pec deck is not a chest press. Similar-looking stations are not automatically interchangeable. If much of the list is missing, another [existing plan](#) is a better starting point.

What if you miss a session?

Resume on your next available day. Keep a day between full sessions where possible, and do not double all the missed sets to catch up. If you are returning after a break, use lighter practice sets and choose your working loads from what you can do that day, rather than forcing the old log.

If two days are your normal schedule, keep two days as the plan. The third day is optional, not a test of commitment.

Questions about a machine-only routine

Can a beginner use this plan?

Consider it if your gym has the listed machines and you can get setup help. Start with the familiarization steps above; the [beginner guide](#) covers the basics.

Do cable machines count?

Yes. Here, machine-only includes cable stacks. This session does not require barbells, dumbbells or a Smith machine.

Should you use two or three days?

Two is the default in this sample. Use the optional third only if it fits your schedule and recovery. The page does not promise the same results from every frequency.

Is there a PDF?

Yes. Print the machine-only workout plan, then use the [printable workout log](#) to record your actual sessions. The [plans guide](#) lists the other routines.

When you need a plan for your actual gym

A sample cannot see which machines fit you or which days you can repeat. [Online coaching for beginners](#) explains the personalized option: workouts in Trainerize and a weekly check-in call. [Apply for coaching](#), or [DM TRANSFORM on Instagram](#).

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

1. American College of Sports Medicine. ACSM Unveils Landmark 2026 Resistance Training Guidelines — First Update in 17 Years (official public summary). *American College of Sports Medicine*, 2026. <https://acsm.org/resistance-training-guidelines-update-2026/> (accessed October 28, 2026).
2. Haugen ME, Vårvik FT, Larsen S, Haugen AS, van den Tillaar R, Bjørnsen T. Effect of free-weight vs. machine-based strength training on maximal strength, hypertrophy and jump performance: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *BMC Sports Science, Medicine and Rehabilitation*, 2023. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10426227/> (accessed October 22, 2026).

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