

A new year workout plan: twelve weeks from the first week of January

A plan that starts in January, and a plan is all this page is: three full-body days, twelve weeks written out week by week, a lighter week in the middle, a floor for the weeks that go sideways, and a check of your log at the end. No promises about what it does to you; a printable version you can follow.

Short answer: Train three full-body days a week for twelve weeks: two weeks to learn the movements, five to add weight, a lighter week, three more to add weight, and a week to read your log. The American College of Sports Medicine's 2026 stand recommends lifting at least twice weekly.¹

By Diogo · Published October 31, 2026 · 6 min read

This plan starts in the first week of January. The date doesn't change how training works, so this page doesn't treat it as special: it's a plain twelve-week plan that happens to start then, written out week by week so nothing has to be decided on a cold Tuesday. It makes no promise about how you'll look or what you'll weigh in March. [How long results take](#) is the honest version of that question.

Why twelve weeks: it's long enough to learn the movements, add weight for a couple of months and still see a full block in your log, and short enough to plan in one sitting. [How long a workout plan should be](#) covers what program lengths the studies used.

The plan: three full-body days

Three sessions a week with a day between them, for example Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Two sessions, A and B, alternated: A, B, A one week and B, A, B the next. Each has a squat, [a hinge](#), a push, a pull and a core move.

Slot	Day A	Day B	At home with dumbbells
Squat	Goblet squat or leg press	Split squat	Goblet squat; split squat
Hinge	Romanian deadlift	Hip thrust	Dumbbell Romanian deadlift; hip thrust off the couch
Push	Dumbbell bench press	Dumbbell shoulder press	Floor press or push-ups ; shoulder press
Pull	Lat pulldown	Seated cable row	One-arm dumbbell row both days
Core	Plank	Dead bug	The same

Sets, reps and effort (practical, this plan's choice): two sets per exercise in the first two weeks and three from week three, eight to twelve reps a set, every set from week three stopped with two or three reps still in you. Rest about ninety seconds. Those numbers sit inside the ranges the site's own guides cite: [how](#)

many sets per week, how many reps and how to judge reps left carry the research.

Why three full-body days: the American College of Sports Medicine's 2026 position stand makes lifting with high effort at least twice a week, all major muscle groups engaged, its primary recommendation,¹ and its 2009 stand on progression puts novices at two to three days a week.² A meta-analysis of 25 studies found that when weekly volume was equated, how often you train a muscle did not meaningfully change growth, so people can choose their frequency by preference.³ Three days is a preference that fits most weeks. Have four? [Which split for the days you have](#) shows the layouts.

The twelve weeks, week by week

Weeks	Sets per exercise	What the weeks are for
1 to 2	2	Learn the movements. Weights that feel too easy, three or four reps left on every set. Write every set down.
3 to 7	3	Add weight. Whenever you reach twelve reps with reps to spare, add the smallest step next session.
8	2	A lighter week: same exercises, same weights, one set fewer.
9 to 11	3	Add weight again. If an exercise has gone stale, swap it for another in the same slot in week 9 only.
12	3	Read the log: compare week 12 with week 3, lift by lift. No maximum attempts.

The adding rule. The ACSM's 2009 stand recommends a 2 to 10% increase in load when you can do the current weight for one or two reps over your target.² With dumbbells, where the jumps are big, add a rep first and move up once the top of the range comes easily. ([Progressive overload, explained.](#))

Why the lighter week keeps lifting. In a 2024 trial in 39 resistance-trained young men and women, a full week without lifting halfway through a nine-week program didn't change lower-body muscle growth, but the group that kept training made greater gains in lower-body strength.⁴ So week 8 here is lighter, not off. [The deload week](#) covers the other ways to do it.

Why a log check and not a test. 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.⁵ Week 12 is that check: the numbers you wrote down in January against the ones you write in March. ([A workout log you can copy.](#))

The floor for bad weeks

Some weeks of any twelve will go sideways: a cold, a work deadline, a trip. The plan has a floor for them, so a bad week shrinks the plan instead of ending it.

- **Two days instead of three.** Do A and B once each, all sets. That still meets the twice-weekly recommendation above.
- **One day.** One full-body session, keep the weights you were using, drop a set from each exercise. A 2021 review of the least training needed to hold on to performance found strength and muscle size could be kept for up to 32 weeks, at least in younger people, with one session a week and one set per

exercise, as long as the load stayed heavy for the person lifting it.⁶

- **A week off.** Then repeat that week of the plan instead of skipping ahead. A holiday in the middle? [The holiday workout](#) covers two weeks away from the plan.

What twelve weeks will and won't show

A twelve-week training study shows how differently people respond to the same program. In 585 men and women who trained one arm for 12 weeks, one-rep-max gains ranged from 0 to +250%, and changes in muscle size from -2 to +59%.⁷ So compare your log with your own week 3, not with anyone else's twelve weeks, and don't read a slow block as a failed one.

The rest of the week counts too. The WHO guideline behind the twice-weekly lifting minimum also asks adults for 150 to 300 minutes of moderate aerobic activity a week, or 75 to 150 minutes of vigorous activity.⁸ Walks on the days between sessions are the easy way there.

After week twelve

Run the twelve weeks again, starting from the weights in your week 12 log. Keep the slots; swap an exercise only if it has gone stale or doesn't suit you. After about six months of steady training you fit the 2009 stand's intermediate group, and its advice moves to three or four days a week.² ([What an intermediate lifter is.](#))

Common questions

Is this a beginner plan?

Yes, and it also suits anyone coming back. Never lifted at all? [How to start lifting weights](#) covers the first sessions in more detail, and this plan picks up from there. Coming back after months off? Start with [getting back into training](#).

Do I have to start in January?

No. Nothing in the twelve weeks depends on the month. Start in the first full week you can, and count the weeks from there.

Can I do it at home?

Yes, with the dumbbell column of the table. No weights at all? Use [the bodyweight workout's](#) exercises in the same slots and the same twelve weeks.

Training toward a date instead?

[The wedding workout plan](#) runs a similar block backwards from a date, with a table for how much time you have.

Is it safe for me?

If you have an injury, a medical condition or a medical question, talk to a doctor before you start. Sharp pain is not soreness; stop and ask.

If you'd rather not plan it alone

A plan on a web page can't see your week or read your log. Coaching here is general strength and fitness coaching: your workouts are built around the days you actually have, and a weekly call looks at the week you just had and rebuilds the next one around what's coming. [Here's how coaching works](#), and [apply](#) tells me about your week. Otherwise: print the plan, pick your three days, and do Day A this week.

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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