

The upper/lower split workout plan: four days a week

Two upper days, two lower days, every muscle twice a week. Here's the four-day plan, written out, with the sets, the rests and what to do when you miss a day.

Short answer: Four sessions a week, two upper body and two lower body, so every muscle is trained twice. Six exercises a session: three sets of five to eight on the big lifts, eight to fifteen on the rest, stopping two or three reps short of failure. Add weight whenever you hit the top of the range on every set.

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Four days a week is where full body starts to feel crowded. Six movements in an hour works when it's the whole week's training; it stops working when you want a second chest exercise, a real leg day and arms that get more than one slot. The upper/lower split is the usual answer: two sessions for the upper body, two for the lower, so every muscle is trained twice a week and no session has to cover everything.

This page is the plan: the four sessions, every exercise with its sets and reps, the rests, how to count what you're doing in a week, and the rule for adding weight. It's written for a gym. Coming from three days? [The full-body plan](#) is the step before this one, and [which split](#) explains why four days points here.

Why upper/lower on four days

The split's whole case is twice-a-week training without a six-day week. A 2016 meta-analysis of ten studies found that, with the amount of training matched, training a muscle twice a week built more muscle than once, and inferred that the major muscle groups should be trained at least twice a week.¹ A bigger 2019 analysis of 25 studies by the same lead author softened that: once weekly volume was equated, how often a muscle was trained made no meaningful difference, and people can pick a frequency by preference.² A 2026 meta-regression of 67 studies and 2,058 participants found that muscle size and strength both rose with weekly sets, with diminishing returns, and that strength also rose with how often a muscle was trained while the effect of frequency on size was compatible with being negligible.³

Read together: what grows muscle is the weekly sets, and spreading them over two sessions per muscle is a sensible way to fit them in and a small help for strength. The American College of Sports Medicine's 2026 position stand lands in the same place, with lifting with high effort at least twice a week, all major muscle groups included, as its primary recommendation.⁴ Four days, upper and lower twice, is the simplest week that does all of that.

The week

Two training days in a row is normal on this split, because they train different halves. Put the days off where your week has gaps.

Day	Classic	Weekend version
Monday	Upper A	Upper A
Tuesday	Lower A	Lower A
Wednesday	Off	Off
Thursday	Upper B	Upper B
Friday	Lower B	Off
Saturday	Off	Lower B
Sunday	Off	Off

Each session is about an hour: six exercises, three sets of most of them. The first lift of every session is the heaviest and the one you'll track most closely. 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,⁵ which is why the raises, curls and calves are at the end.

The four sessions

Sets and reps are listed with each exercise. "3 × 6–8" is three sets of six to eight reps.

Upper A

1. **Bench press**, 3 × 6–8
2. **Barbell row**, 3 × 6–8
3. **Overhead press**, 3 × 8–12
4. **Lat pulldown**, 3 × 8–12
5. **Lateral raises**, 2 × 12–15
6. **Triceps pushdown and a curl**, 2 × 10–15 each, one after the other

Lower A

1. **Back squat**, 3 × 6–8
2. **Romanian deadlift**, 3 × 8–12
3. **Leg press**, 3 × 10–12
4. **Leg curl**, 3 × 10–15
5. **Standing calf raise**, 3 × 10–15 (the calf workout covers the setup)
6. **Plank**, 3 holds, as long as the position stays good

Upper B

1. **Incline dumbbell press**, 3 × 8–12
2. **Pull-ups** or lat pulldown, 3 × 8–12

3. **Seated cable row**, 3 × 10–12
4. **Dumbbell shoulder press** or **Arnold press**, 3 × 8–12
5. **Face pulls**, 2 × 12–15
6. **Hammer curls and an overhead triceps extension**, 2 × 10–15 each, one after the other

Lower B

1. **Deadlift**, conventional or trap bar, 3 × 5–8
2. **Bulgarian split squat**, 3 × 8–12 each leg
3. **Hip thrust**, 3 × 8–12
4. **Leg extension**, 2 × 12–15
5. **Seated calf raise**, 3 × 12–15
6. **Dead bug**, 3 × 8–10 each side, slow ([the core workout](#) has swaps)

Rest, effort and the warm-up

Rest: two to three minutes after the first lift of each session, about ninety seconds after the others, about a minute after the raises and arm work. A 2018 systematic review of 23 studies and 491 participants found rests of more than two minutes were needed to maximize strength gains in trained lifters, while 60 to 120 seconds was enough in untrained people.⁶ 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.⁷ ([Rest between sets, in more detail.](#))

Effort: every set stops with two or three good reps left, one or two on the raises, curls and calves. 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 so the small exercises, where a missed rep costs nothing, are where you go closest. ([How to judge reps left.](#))

Warm-up: two or three lighter sets of the first lift, working up to the first working weight. The other exercises need a set at most. ([The full warm-up](#), and [a calculator for the sets.](#))

Counting your weekly sets

On the four sessions above, the back gets twelve direct sets a week (two rows, two pulldowns or pull-ups), the quads eleven, the hamstrings and glutes twelve, the shoulders ten, the chest six direct sets plus the pressing it shares with the shoulders, and the arms four direct sets each plus every press and pull. The 2026 meta-regression found the strongest support for counting an indirect set, like a row's work for the biceps, as half a set,³ which puts the chest and arms in the same range as everything else. The ACSM's 2026 review found muscle growth enhanced by ten or more sets per muscle group a week.⁴ A 2022 systematic review of seven studies in young, trained men concluded that 12 to 20 weekly sets per muscle may be an optimum standard recommendation.⁹

If one area matters more to you, add a set to each of its exercises rather than a seventh exercise. ([Counting sets per week, explained](#); [the chest workout](#) and [the back workout](#) show what a priority looks like.)

The eight-week progression

Weeks 1 and 2: find the weights

Two sets of everything in week one, the sets listed above from week two, three or four reps in reserve, every set written down. Pick weights you could repeat, not weights you can survive. ([How much weight to lift.](#))

Weeks 3 to 8: add the smallest amount

Whenever you hit the top of the range on every set with two or three reps 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.⁵ On the first lift that's the smallest plates; on dumbbells, the next pair; on a machine, one pin. Where you didn't hit the top, repeat the weight and chase the reps.

After week 8: keep it, or change one thing

If the log still shows weights going up, keep going. If the first lifts have stalled for three weeks, take a [deload week](#), then change one thing: swap an exercise inside its slot, or move the first lift to five sets of five for a block. ([Progressive overload, explained](#), has the other levers.) Don't change the split; the logbook only works when the plan holds still.

When you miss a day

On a split, a missed session is a missed half of the body, so the rule is to do the session you missed next, not the one the calendar says. Three days this week? Run Upper A, Lower A, Upper B, and start next week on Lower B; over two weeks each half still gets three sessions. Two days? Do one upper and one lower, 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.¹⁰ Away from a gym for a week? [Run full body on the road](#) and pick the split back up when you're home.

Common questions

Can you run an upper/lower split on three days?

As a rotation: upper, lower, upper one week and lower, upper, lower the next. Each half gets three sessions every two weeks. If three days is your normal week, [the full-body plan](#) is the better fit.

Upper/lower or push/pull/legs?

Mostly a question of days: this split fits four, push/pull/legs fits six. [The split guide](#) compares them, and [the push/pull/legs routine](#) is the six-day plan written out.

Can you do it with dumbbells only?

Every slot has a dumbbell version, but the first lifts run out of weight fast at home. [The dumbbell plan](#) is written for a pair and three days; the body-part pages ([leg day](#), [shoulders](#), [arms](#)) each have a home version you can drop in here.

How long is a session?

About an hour with the rests above. Over that, cut the warm-up sets on the later exercises before you cut a working set.

If you'd rather not plan it alone

A split on a web page doesn't know which four days you have or which of these lifts your gym makes hard to get to. Coaching is the version where your workouts live in the Trainerize app, the split is built around the days you actually have, and a weekly call looks at the week you just had and rebuilds the next one.

[Coaching to build muscle](#) explains how that works, and [apply](#) tells me about your week. Otherwise: pick your four days, put them in the calendar, and start with Upper 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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