

A workout plan for new dads: three short sessions, built for broken sleep

A new baby takes the one thing every workout plan assumes: a predictable week. Here's a plan that doesn't assume it. Three short full-body sessions, at home or in the gym, a floor for the weeks that fall apart, and a rule for the mornings after a short night.

Short answer: Train three times a week for thirty to forty-five minutes, full body, at home or in the gym, and treat one session a week as the floor you don't go under. On a short night, lift last session's weights with one set fewer. Keep each set two or three reps short of failure, add a little whenever the top of the rep range feels easy, and write every session down.

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Most workout plans are written for a week that repeats: the same free hour on the same days, the same amount of sleep. A new baby takes that away. Nights are broken, the free hour moves, and a plan that needs a predictable week dies in the first one that isn't.

This plan doesn't need one. It's three short full-body sessions, each with a home version and a gym version, a floor for the weeks that go sideways, and a rule for what to do after a short night. "Dad bod" is what a lot of people type when they go looking for this; the plan is the same whatever you call it. Never lifted before? [The first four weeks](#) covers the basics, and this page picks up from there.

The idea: a plan with a floor

Three things decide whether a plan survives a newborn: how short a session can be, how few sessions a week still count, and what happens on the worst week. The research is reassuring on all three.

- **Sessions can be short.** A 2021 review of time-efficient training recommends prioritising big multi-joint movements (at least one leg press or squat, one upper-body pull and one upper-body push) and says weekly training volume matters more than how many days it's spread over, with a floor of four sets per muscle group a week in the six-to-fifteen-rep range.¹ Three sessions of six movements clears that floor with room to spare.
- **Two days a week is enough to count.** The American College of Sports Medicine's 2026 position stand makes lifting with high effort at least twice a week, with all major muscle groups trained, its primary recommendation, and says even "minimal doses" of lifting bring substantial gains in strength and muscle.² Two or more days a week of muscle-strengthening activity is also the World Health Organization's guideline for adults.³
- **The days don't matter much.** A meta-analysis of 25 studies found that when the total amount of training was matched, how many days it was spread over made no meaningful difference to muscle growth, and concluded people can choose how often to train a muscle "based on personal preference".⁴ So Monday, Wednesday, Friday is a suggestion, not a rule. Tuesday, Saturday and Sunday works too.

The plan: three sessions, home or gym

Two sessions, A and B, alternated: A, B, A one week and B, A, B the next. Each has six slots in the same order (a squat, a [hinge](#), a push, a pull, one single-leg or extra move and a core move), so every session trains the whole body. The home version assumes a pair of dumbbells or nothing at all; the gym version comes first in each row.

Slot	Day A	Day B
Squat	Leg press or goblet squat . Home: goblet squat with one dumbbell, or a slow bodyweight squat	Split squat. Home: reverse lunge , dumbbells in hand if you have them
Hinge	Romanian deadlift with dumbbells. Home: the same, or a single-leg hip bridge	Hip thrust . Home: glute bridge with a dumbbell on your hips
Push	Dumbbell bench press or a chest-press machine. Home: push-up, hands on the sofa arm if the floor version is too hard	Overhead dumbbell press. Home: the same, or a pike push-up
Pull	Lat pulldown. Home: one-arm dumbbell row, free hand on a chair	Seated cable row . Home: bent-over dumbbell row, or a band row with the band in a door
Fifth slot	Step-up onto a bench or the bottom stair	One you like: curls, lateral raises , triceps pushdowns. Home: dumbbell curls or band pull-aparts
Core	Plank, as long as the position stays good	Dead bug, slow. (Swaps are on the core workout .)

Sets and reps: two sets of eight to twelve reps for the first two weeks, three sets from week three. With light dumbbells or bodyweight, work in twelve to twenty. Every set stops with two or three reps still in you, three or four in the first two weeks. ([Here's how to judge reps left](#).) Rest about ninety seconds between sets, or pair the push with the pull and the hinge with the core move and rest less: the same time-efficiency review found that supersets, drop sets and rest-pause training roughly halve a session's length while keeping the volume.¹ ([How to pair exercises](#).) Pair the machine or dumbbell versions, not a heavy barbell lift; the review advises against pairing those.¹ Warm up with two lighter sets of the first exercise, not fifteen minutes on a bike; the review advises keeping warm-ups specific to the exercise.¹ A full session runs thirty-five to forty-five minutes with straight sets, about thirty paired.

Progression: whenever you reach the top of the rep range with reps to spare, add the smallest step next session: one notch of weight, or one rep. The ACSM's 2009 position stand on progression puts the step at 2 to 10 percent more weight once you can do one or two reps beyond your target, and sets the beginner's range at eight to twelve reps.⁵ At home, where the dumbbells jump in big steps, add reps first, then slow the lowering, then go one leg or one arm at a time. ([Progressive overload, explained](#).)

Where the session goes

With a newborn, the free hour isn't fixed, so don't fix the session to a clock. Anchor it to something that happens every day instead:

- **The first nap.** Twenty minutes into the first nap is a slot that tends to exist. The home version of this plan was written for it.

- **Before the house wakes up**, if you're the one who got the longer stretch of sleep.
- **On the way home** from work, if you work outside the house: the gym version, in and out in forty-five minutes.
- **After bedtime.** Later than ideal for some people, but a session that happens late beats one that doesn't happen. [Morning or evening? Here's how to choose](#), and why keeping the same slot helps.

Pick the home version on the days the gym is the thing you'd skip. The ACSM stand lists home-based and elastic-band lifting among the kinds that improve strength, and found muscle growth didn't depend on whether the loads were light or very heavy.² [The three-day dumbbell plan](#) is a fuller home program if the gym stops happening altogether, and [the bodyweight workout](#) needs nothing at all.

The short-night rule

Some mornings you'll have slept in pieces. This part is practical, not medical: questions about sleep and health are for a doctor, and this is only about what to do with the session.

- **Same exercises, same weights, one set fewer.** Two sets instead of three. No new exercises and no testing yourself. A short night is never the day for a personal record.
- **Or move it.** If the session is due in the morning and the night was bad, do it after the first nap, or tomorrow. The plan counts sessions per week, not per day.
- **Or walk.** A walk with the stroller is still activity. The WHO guideline behind the two-day lifting minimum also asks adults for 150 to 300 minutes of [moderate aerobic activity](#) a week, and says some physical activity is better than none.³ Stroller walks count toward it.

Expect to be sore after the first sessions if lifting is new to you: soreness is common when a kind of activity is new, and one review advises easing into new exercise over a week or two.⁶ That's why the first two weeks are two sets with reps to spare.

The floor: the week that falls apart

Some weeks will hold one session, not three. One is the floor, and it's enough to keep what you've built. 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 lifting session a week and one set per exercise, as long as the load stayed heavy for the person lifting it.⁷ Its main conclusion is that intensity, meaning how heavy the weight is for you, is the key to holding on, even when how often and how much you train drop a lot.⁷

So the floor session is Day A or Day B, every slot, one or two hard sets each, at the weights you were using. Not a lighter "something is better than nothing" session: the same weights, less of them. When the week opens up again, go back to three days at the weights you left off at, not back to week one.

Five rules for the first year

- **Count sessions per week, not per day.** Three is the plan, two is fine, one is the floor. Zero is the only number that isn't.
- **Never miss twice.** One missed session is a baby. Two in a row is the start of quitting.

- **Write every session down.** 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.⁸ On a short night, the logbook remembers what you can't. ([A workout log you can copy.](#))
- **Cut exercises before you cut effort.** A short session of easy sets is just a short session. If there's only twenty minutes, do the squat, the push, the pull and the hinge and skip the rest. ([The 30-minute workout](#) is the timed version of that layout.)
- **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 three days a week enough?

Yes. Two days with every major muscle group trained is the ACSM's primary recommendation,² and three days of this plan gives each movement pattern nine hard sets a week once you're on three sets. [How often to train](#) covers the other options.

What if I can only train at home?

Use the home column for every slot. With a pair of adjustable dumbbells it stays a full program for months; [the dumbbell plan](#) says what to change when they start to feel light.

Should I train on no sleep?

That's between you and a doctor if it's a health question. As a training question: same weights, one set fewer, or move the session, or walk. Don't test a max on a short night.

How long until it feels normal again?

Nobody can promise a date, and this page doesn't. [How long results take](#) lays out the clocks that strength, muscle and the mirror run on.

If you'd rather not plan it alone

A plan on a web page can't see your week, and with a newborn the week changes by the day. Coaching is the version where your workouts live in the Trainerize app, 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. [Coaching for a week that doesn't hold still](#) explains how that works, and [apply](#) tells me about your week. Otherwise: pick the slot for your next session, put it in your phone, 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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