

How to Gain Lean Muscle Mass: The Definitive Guide

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People who successfully build muscle and get strong over time do two things very well:

First, they accumulate the right knowledge that will get them results.

Secondly, they put 100% of their efforts into putting that knowledge to work for them.

But you might be asking yourself:

“But there’s so much information out there? Which is going to help me gain lean muscle?”

Today I’m going to help you out by presenting you with the most comprehensive guide on muscle growth online.

In it, you’ll learn everything you need to know ranging from exercises, to training volume and frequency all the way to progressive overload.

But First, The Often Asked Question: Can I build muscle mass while staying lean?

Let’s face it:

Yes, we’re doing what we’re doing to feel good, be healthy and functional but we also want to look good. And there’s nothing wrong with that.

You can build muscle while staying lean but you need to be strict with your macronutrients to achieve that. This is [clean bulking](#) and everyone who is willing to put in the effort can build a good amount of muscle over time without much fat. Here are two examples of guys who’ve gained more than 15 pounds and gained little to no fat in the process:



08/11/11 164 lbs	10/06/11 167.5 lbs	11/19/11 172.5 lbs	01/06/12 178.5 lbs	02/07/12 183 lbs

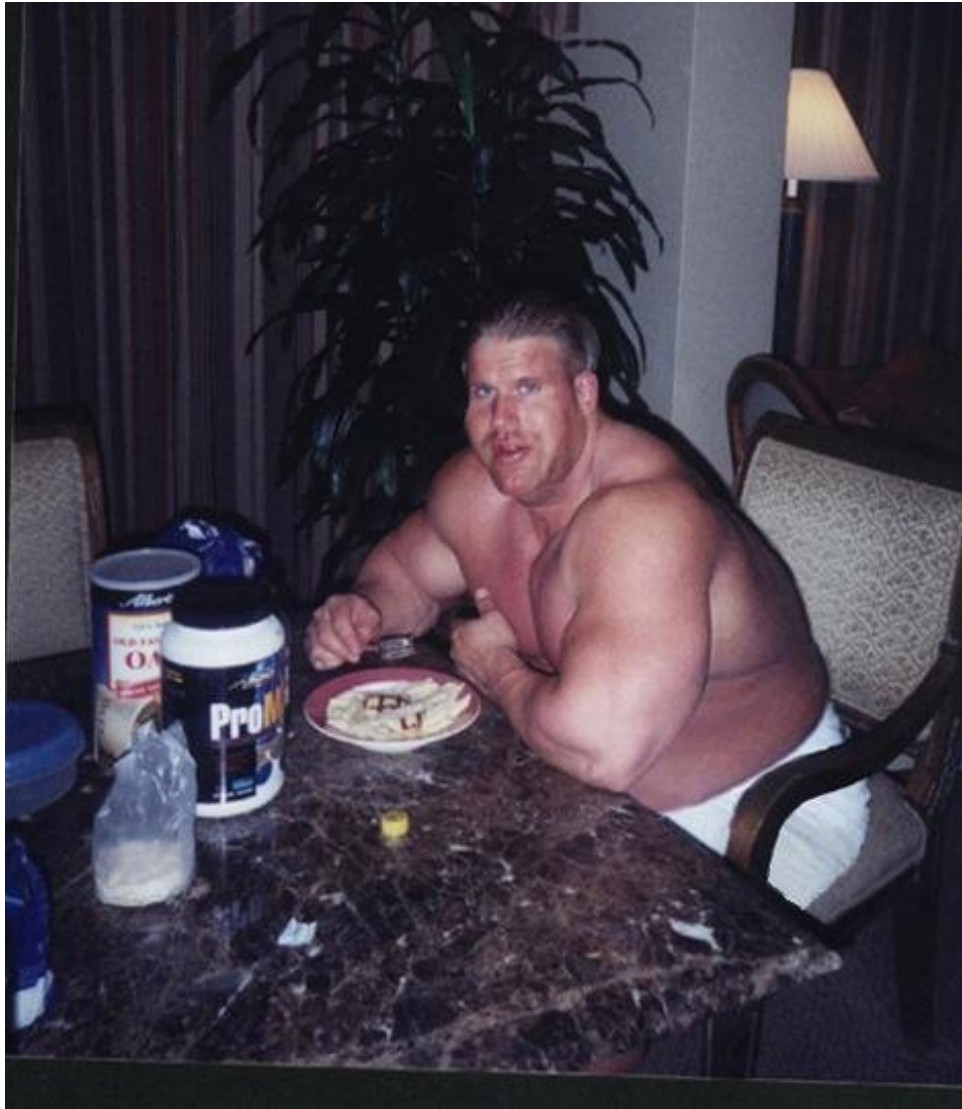
Source: http://musclesymmetry.blogspot.bg/2014_04_01_archive.html



START

7ISH MONTHS

If you want to take the aggressive approach to building muscle, keep in mind that it will also result in more fat gains. Take a look at this picture of Jay Cutler (4x Mr. Olympia) in his off-season:



Since muscle growth is limited, I don't see a reason to pig out for a few months followed by a longer (than necessary) cutting period. Take a look at how much muscle you can gain:

Year of Proper Training	Potential Rate of Muscle Gain per Year
1	20-25 pounds (2 pounds per month)
2	10-12 pounds (1 pound per month)
3	5-6 pounds (0.5 pound per month)
4+	2-3 pounds (not worth calculating)

Source: <http://www.bodyrecomposition.com/muscle-gain/whats-my-genetic-muscular-potential.html/>

Now, considering those numbers, do you think it's wise to put on 60 pounds of weight in 1 year?

Learn What the Best Exercises For Each Muscle Group Are

It's no secret that certain exercises provide more of a stimulus than others. There are two types of exercises: compound and isolation. Compound exercises work a range of muscles, while isolation exercises need a single muscle group to do the work.

Right off the bat, we can conclude that a compound exercise such as the deadlift is going to work more muscles and need more effort to perform compared to a dumbbell preacher curl which only works your biceps.

But, both types of exercises have their place in a well-structured training program and both are good for different things.

For example:

Compound lifts are great for developing your entire body, strength, coordination and athleticism. They should be the staple of your workouts and your goal should be to make progress on them.

Yet, isolation exercises, while doing less work in comparison, are a great way to develop a muscular physique, because they laser-focus on one muscle group at a time.

While doing a regular flat barbell bench press, you are working your triceps, as well as your chest, that is a given. But if you want to step your game up and inflate the back of your arms, doing isolation exercises such as EZ-bar skull crushers, cable tricep pushdowns and overhead dumbbell tricep extensions is a must. They won't work a range of different muscles but they are great for targeting a single muscle groups and stimulating growth.

But what if I don't care about size? I just want to get strong as hell.

This is a common concern and some guys don't care for the big, muscular look. They just want to lift a ton. If you're in that camp, read on.

Here's the deal:

It's likely possible to achieve decent numbers while weighing less ([check out this guy](#)) but you should know that progress is going to be much slower than if you were to chase both strength and size. Not only does more size give you better leverages when it comes to lifting but bigger muscles also have a [greater strength potential](#). You'll have a much easier time reaching the [1000-pound club](#) while chasing size as opposed to trying to reach that level at your current weight.

This is where those isolation exercises come to play. They help develop the different muscle groups that go into a complex movement and help you build more strength faster.

Some will argue that just practicing the big three lifts is enough to reach impressive numbers on them. But, I believe that it is a healthy blend of strength training and bodybuilding that gave birth to the best athletes out there.

So what are some great exercises for different muscle groups I can include into my training?

For the sake of serving you as best as I can, I will provide a list of exercises for each group and I'll add links to instructional videos. Your workouts don't have to be limited to the examples below. These are just suggestions to include.

BONUS: Knowing what to do is important. But, knowing what NOT to do is equally as important. **Grab my free eBook "9 Major Muscle-Building Mistakes Limiting Your Growth".**

Chest

[Flat Barbell/Flat Dumbbell Bench Press](#), [Incline Barbell/Incline Dumbbell Bench Press](#), [Decline Barbell/Decline Dumbbell Bench Press](#), [Incline/Decline/Flat Dumbbell Chest Flyes](#), [Cable Chest Flyes](#), [Chest Dips](#), [Hammer Strength Chest Press](#) and [Dumbbell Chest Pullovers](#).

Back

Conventional, Sumo, Rack pull Deadlift, Pull-ups, Chin-ups, Barbell/Dumbbell Rows, Pendlay Rows, Cable/Dumbbell Lat Pullovers, Seated Cable Rows, T-Bar Rows and Lat Pulldowns.

Quadriceps

Barbell Back/Front Squats, Goblet Squats, Bulgarian Split Squats, Dumbbell/Barbell Lunges, Leg Extensions, Leg Press Machine and Hack Squat Machine.

Biceps

Straight/EZ Bar Curls, Alternating Dumbbell Bicep Curls, Dumbbell Hammer Curls, Barbell/Dumbbell Spider Curls, Cable Curls, Preacher Curls, EZ-Bar Preacher Curls and Crucifix Curls.

Triceps

Close-Grip Barbell Bench Press, EZ-bar/Dumbbell Skull Crushers, Dumbbell Kickbacks, Dumbbell Overhead Tricep Extension, Dumbbell/EZ-Bar/Cable Overhead Tricep Extension and Cable Tricep Pushdowns.

Shoulders

Standing Dumbbell/Barbell Shoulder Press, Seated Dumbbell/Barbell Shoulder Press, Side Lateral Dumbbell/Cable Raises, Front Delt Raises With Cable/Dumbbell/EZ-Bar, Cable Rope Face Pulls, Bent Over Reverse Dumbbell Flyes and Barbell Upright Rows.

Hamstrings

Stiff-Legged Dumbbells/Barbell Deadlift, Glute Hamstring Raise, Seated Hamstring Curls and Lying Hamstring Curls.

Calves

Seated Calf Raises, Standing Calf Raises and Donkey Calf Raises.

Abs

Kneeling Cable Crunches, Hanging Knee/Leg Raises, Decline Sit-ups (with or without weight) and Lying Leg Raises.

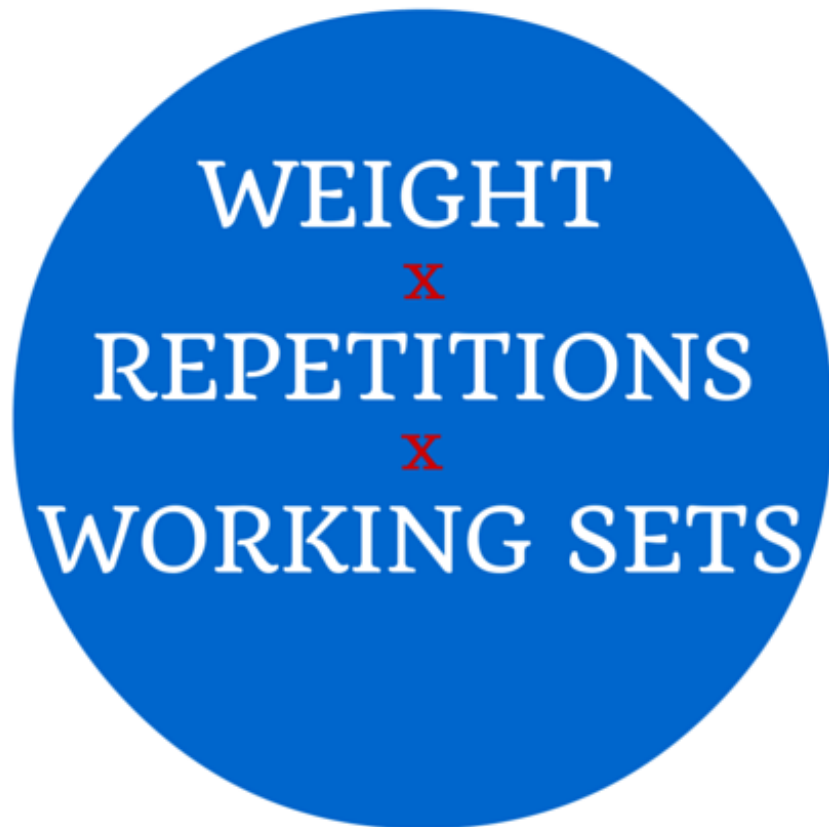
Obliques

[Side Bends](#) (With Any Type of Resistance), [Russian Plate Twist](#), [Cross Body Mountain Climb](#) and [Cable Woodchoppers](#).

Traps

[Barbell/Dumbbell/Cable/Smith Machine](#) Shrugs.

Optimize Your Training Volume for Best Results



The term “training volume” refers to the amount of work you do each workout or within a given week. There are a few ways to track your training volume such as counting your total repetitions and sets done for each muscle group.

Take it a step further: track your training volume by multiplying the **load** you’re lifting by the **repetitions** done for the total **sets** done. This is a much more accurate way to track your training volume and have a better understanding of your progress.

Let me give you an example to illustrate:

Let’s take a regular lifter. His bench press personal record is 255 pounds for a single. If he were to do 5 sets of 5 repetitions with 80% of his 1 RM ($255 \times 0.8 = 204$ pounds), that would be $204 \times 5 = 1020$ pounds. And $1020 \times 5 = 5100$ pounds of total volume for that one exercise.

Small disclaimer: Some sort of an intensity threshold needs to be broken for your training to actually be effective. While you can grab a pair of light dumbbells and curl them for an hour, it won't force growth. There needs to be a balance between training intensity (% of what you can lift) and volume for muscle growth.

This applies to each exercise you do in the gym. Still, don't get carried away with the obsession of building up more volume at the expense of good form.

Now that you have a good understanding of how to best track your volume, you might be wondering:

"Well, do I need to track each exercise I do in the gym?" And the answer is no.

You can choose to track only your main movements and some of the accessory exercises after that. You don't need to obsess over every single set.

So, how much training volume is best for me?

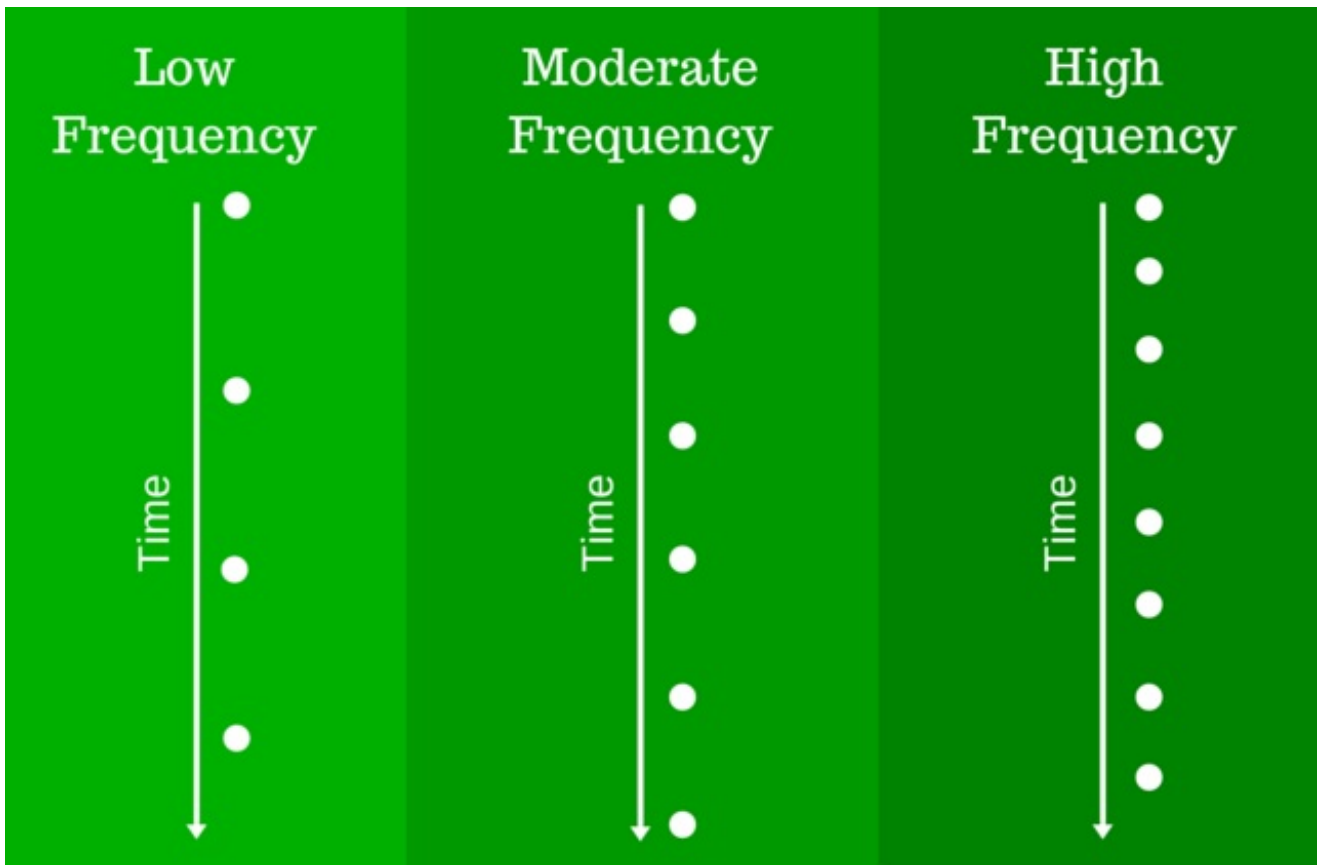
There isn't "one shoe fits all" with this question but there are general guidelines you can follow. For bigger muscle groups such as your back, chest and quadriceps, aim to do between 12 and 16 total sets per week.

For smaller muscle groups such as your arms, shoulders and calves, start with 6 to 9 working sets per week.

These are only general guidelines but it comes down to you to determine how much is actually optimal for you. You might need less volume to make progress and you might need more. What I recommend is starting low and working your way up the range. Your aim should be to be doing as little training as you can while making decent progress. Due to your body's natural adaptive mechanism toward stress, the least required work to make progress over time is going to increase. What causes progress now can be insufficient in a year.

Start low, track your volume, see if you're making progress over the weeks. Add a set here and there when you start feeling like your workouts aren't producing results.

What is the Best Training Frequency for Muscle Growth



Some say training each muscle group once a week is enough. Others think a higher frequency of training is a better option for muscle growth. But who is right and who is wrong?

Let's dissect the 3 frequencies of training and come up with an unbiased answer.

Once Per Week Workout Frequency

If you've spent any time in the gym, you've come across this frequency the most. It is the popular kid at school and the common bro splits only have you focus on each muscle once per week.

Let's take a look at a couple of splits:

Example Split #1 (4 Workouts):

1.Monday: Back & Biceps

2.Tuesday: Chest & Triceps

3.Wednesday: Off

4.Thursday: Shoulders & Abs

5.Friday: Legs

6.Saturday: Off

7.Sunday: Off

Example Split #2 (3 Workouts):

1.Monday: Legs & Abs

2.Tuesday: Off

3.Wednesday: Chest, Shoulders & Triceps

4.Thursday: Off

5.Friday: Back & Biceps

6.Saturday: off

7.Sunday: off

As you can see with these examples, each muscle group gets trained once per week or every **7th day**, making them low frequency programs.

The problem with such low frequency training is the fact that you're not utilizing your week the best way you can.

Think about it:

Training each muscle group once and then waiting 6 days before training it again gives you a lot of downtime. Much more than what your muscles need to recover and do the work again. There are [other factors](#) that you need to consider for muscle recovery, but the general rule that applies to most people in normal circumstances states: **a muscle won't need more than 72 hours of recovery time before you can train it again.**

Look at it from this perspective:

If you were to train your chest once a week for an entire year, that is 52 workouts and **52 opportunities** to stimulate growth. But, if you were to train your chest two times per week, it adds up to **104 opportunities** to stimulate growth within a single year. And assuming that everything else stays the same, which one do you think is going to cause more growth and strength development? That is right, the twice-per-week frequency.

And I said above, waiting for 7 days before training a muscle again is not needed and it's more than enough recovery time. You're only leaving time on the table which could be better spent training more often. And while low frequency is the easiest one to schedule, it doesn't make it, in any way, superior or better.

Can it work, though? Sure. As long as you're doing everything right, a low frequency program will produce results for you. But is it optimal? No. And while you might have fallen into a comfortable routine that you like to follow, remember: it's not only important to know if something works, but is it the optimal way.

A low frequency program can work in two particular scenarios that I can think of:

1. If you're only interested in maintaining your physique and performance.
2. If you have above average genetics for bodybuilding. Building muscle and strength comes easier to you and you've always been athletic.

But, I can't proceed without saying a few words about who this type of frequency is not suited for:

- If you want to maximize your strength and athleticism.
- If you're interested in building as much muscle mass as you can.

Twice Per Week Workout Frequency

This is the middle ground for training frequency and it's generally accepted to be the best one for guys and girls in the intermediate-advanced level. Let's take a look at a couple of different splits utilizing this frequency:

Upper-Lower Body Split Example (4 Workouts):

1.Monday: Upper Body

2.Tuesday: Lower Body

3.Wednesday: Off

4.Thursday: Upper Body

5.Friday: Lower Body

6.Saturday: Off

7.Sunday: Off

With this classic split, you're hitting every muscle group twice per week. Meaning that each muscle works every **3rd** of **4th** day as opposed to every **7th** day.

But, there is another way to set up a higher frequency program where you're not training everything twice per week but rather **about twice** per week.

The first time I came across this idea was from [an article](#) written by Jay over at AWorkoutRoutine and I loved it. It's simple, yet few people ever talk about it. We often think of a single week as a measuring unit for our programs. Yet, there are no rules to suggest that jumping on the other side of the fence is bad. This is where this split comes:

Week 1

1.Monday: Upper Body

2.Tuesday: off

3.Wednesday: Lower Body

4.Thursday: off

5.Friday: Upper Body

6.Saturday: off

7.Sunday: off

Week 2

1.Monday: Lower Body

2.Tuesday: off

3.Wednesday: Upper Body

4.Thursday: off

5.Friday: Lower Body

6.Saturday: off

7.Sunday: off

And the second split example:

Week 1

1.Monday: Chest, Shoulders & Triceps

2.Tuesday: Back & Biceps

3.Wednesday: off

4.Thursday: Legs & Abs

5.Friday: off

6.Saturday: Chest, Shoulders & Triceps

7.Sunday: Back & Biceps

Week 2

1.Monday: off

2.Tuesday: Legs & Abs

3.Wednesday: off

4.Thursday: Chest, Shoulders & Triceps

5.Friday: Back & Biceps

6.Saturday: off

7.Sunday: Legs & Abs

As you can see, with these 2 splits, each muscle group is trained every **4th** or **5th** day for a total of 3 times every 2 weeks. This is a great transition split to do for a while, before jumping into twice-per-week training. This way, you can dip your toe into the water and get a good feel of what higher frequency feels like. You can also adjust your training volume to what feels optimal and allows you to recover.

There is a third alternative for setting up a higher-ish training frequency split where you do most of your volume for a given muscle on one day and then provide extra stimulus to that same muscle days later:

Example:

1. **Monday:** Back (+Leg exercise)

2. **Tuesday:** Chest (+ Shoulder exercise)

3. **Wednesday:** Off

4. **Thursday:** Legs (+ Back exercise)

5. **Friday:** Shoulders (+ Chest exercise)

6. **Saturday:** Arms (Optional volume day)

7. **Sunday:** Off

A split such as this one is trickier to design in a way that is not going to sabotage you but it's a viable option to consider.

Now, why would this frequency be in any way superior to the once-per week?

Depending on the impact of the workout, muscle protein synthesis is usually [elevated for 24 to 36 hours after training](#). After that point, it declines to baseline levels. Now, let's apply this to the real world:

You train your chest muscles on Monday's workout and muscle protein synthesis is elevated for 36 hours. By Wednesday, it's back to normal. If you don't train your chest again within that week, you are waiting an extra 3-4 days before stimulating it again, causing more muscle damage and potential growth.

This might not seem like much but look at it from the perspective of an entire year: 52 workouts will likely result in much less strength and muscle gains compared to 104 workouts.

BONUS: Knowing what to do is important. But, knowing what NOT to do is equally as important. **Grab my free eBook "9 Major Muscle-Building Mistakes Limiting Your Growth".**

Three Times Per Week Workout Frequency

With this frequency, each muscle group is trained three times per week or every **2nd** to **3rd** day.

Let's take a look at a split example:

1. **Monday:** Full Body

2. **Tuesday:** off

3. **Wednesday:** Full Body

4. **Thursday:** off

5. **Friday:** Full Body

6. **Saturday:** off

7. **Sunday:** off

There are other ways to set up this kind of frequency but they would need more training days every week.

The main difference between this and low frequency is that with this one your goal is to cause **less stimulus** to

each muscle. That way, you'll be able to recover in less time. Whereas with a low frequency, your goal is to cause much **more damage** within a given workout, to warrant for the entire week. See, your total training volume for each muscle group can be **the same** in both frequencies but individual workouts **are not the same**.

Where most people fail with transitioning from once-per-week to 2-times-per-week and beyond is they assume that their work volume for one workout... should now be the volume for every workout.

That is why calculating your total volume and then spreading it within the week is better. As long as you can recover between workouts and continue making progress, you're on the right track.

Who is a 3-times-per-week frequency best suited for?

If your primary goal is to improve your main lifts, a higher frequency approach will allow you more variation and more chances to get stronger. Many strength athletes follow this approach and few only perform the bench press, squat and deadlift just once per week.

Also, if you're a beginner, the full body split 3 times per week is going to be the most effective way to train.

There has been some research done on the effects of different training frequencies on beginners and have come to the conclusion that, regardless of the trainee's goals, a high frequency approach works best.

If you don't fall into either of the two categories above, you shouldn't use this training frequency.

Will it work? Yes. Any well planned and applied training protocol will provide results but we're not just looking for 'providing results'. We want the best possible way to train for our goals.

Exercise Selection and Priority for Best Results

Walk into any gym and I guarantee, you'll see at least one person who is not prioritizing his exercises well. For example: doing isolation exercises such as dumbbell kickbacks before flat bench press. Rows, pulldowns and pullovers before deadlifts or pull ups. Side lateral dumbbell raises before overhead shoulder press. The list goes on, but you get the picture.

And before you jump at me with "Maybe they don't care to get strong, so what's wrong with that?" let me tell you why I consider this to be a poor approach to training:

You see, compound exercises generally allow you to train each muscle that is involved with a higher load. This doesn't mean that doing close-grip bench press with 225 pounds is going to be better for your triceps than doing dumbbell kickbacks with a light dumbbell. There are other things worth considering. Such as bad technique and the possibility that your chest muscles are strong and overcompensating for the tricep.

But, there is a big advantage to doing the bigger movements early in your workouts. Taking advantage of your strength early before your muscles become fatigued is important. **You can overload your body with more weight, more repetitions and even less rest between sets (intensity, volume and density).**

In the above section, we discussed the importance of progressive overload for long term progress. It's important to remember that if you're doing the same thing in your training as you did a year ago, chances are, you haven't made much progress. This is why doing compound exercises early on is important. Your focus should be to make progress on them. Keep track of the loads you're using, your rest periods and repetitions. Over time, as you get stronger, you'll be able to overload your muscles with more training volume.

Don't start your workouts with isolation exercises and then move onto the compound movements. Understand that it is not an optimal priority set and you're hindering your progress.

Here is a good way to structure your workout:

- Start with a heavy, compound exercise (flat bench press, close-grip bench press, barbell squats, deadlifts and barbell overhead press).
- Once you're done with that, move to secondary exercises that will assist your main movements (**dumbbell press/hammer strength press for chest**, cable tricep pushdowns/tricep dips for triceps, **leg press/hack squat/split squat for legs**, barbell or dumbbell rows/pull ups/pull downs for back and **overhead press variation/side lateral dumbbell raises for your shoulders**).
- After that, you can move to a second accessory exercise. The goal is to build training volume that will produce muscle growth over time. These exercises are also great for targeting weak points that are prohibiting you from making good progress on your main lifts.
- By this point, you can either start training a different muscle group or continue adding more volume for the current group. For example:
 If you're training legs, do some calve or hamstring accessory work.
 If you're training chest, consider a fly exercise to finish off.
 If you're training back, do an exercise for your traps or lats.
 If you're training shoulders, include a movement for your rear delts.

Think of the compound lifts as the foundation of a building. Once you lay it down, the accessory work is going to be the tall, beautiful skyscraper built on top.

Here is an example leg work out that follows these guidelines:

Exercise 1: Barbell back squats – 4 sets, 4-6 repetitions

Exercise 2: Leg press – 3 sets, 6-10 repetitions

Exercise 3: Alternating dumbbell lunges – 3 sets, 8-12 repetitions per leg

Exercise 4: Lying hamstring curls – 3 sets, 10-15 repetitions

Exercise 5: Seated calf raises – 3 sets, 8-15 repetitions

BONUS: Knowing what to do is important. But, knowing what NOT to do is equally as important. **Grab my free eBook “9 Major Muscle-Building Mistakes Limiting Your Growth”.**

This example of a leg workout also follows the guidelines in [reverse pyramid training](#). You start off with heavy sets and, as time passes, decrease intensity and increase repetition ranges. This is a smart way to structure your accessory work. You don't want to be ego lifting on isolation exercises where breaking down your form is easy.

How to Gain Lean Muscle Mass Thanks to Progressive Overload(And Why It Is Crucial)



“Insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results.”

– Albert Einstein

This is a great quote and it fits training quite well. A lot of people fall into the comfort zone of training and don't bother to change and improve it. Yet, they can't seem to understand, why they aren't making any progress.

“I've been lifting 3-4 times per week for 8 months now and I'm still weak and haven't put on any real muscle. What's wrong with me?”

You can find this question asked everywhere. On forums, in comment sections, on live Q&A's and so on. And it is frustrating because people are putting in work but not getting any results to show for it. In essence, **they are wasting their time.**

The often overlooked but key rule for long term progress in the gym is progressive overload.

In short: **progressive increase of stress on the body due to training.** There are many ways to achieve that, some of which I will list down below. But, let's examine why progressive overload is so important.

Why progressive overload is that important.

The progressive overload principle states:

In order for a muscle to grow, strength to be gained, performance to increase, or for any similar improvement to occur, the human body must be forced to adapt to a tension that is above and beyond what it has previously experienced.

This is important to remember moving forward. Take a snapshot with your phone or write it down if you want to.

I often see people at the gym who have fallen into a comfort zone of training and are doing the same thing over and over. Not surprisingly, they don't change much from year to year. There is a simple explanation for it and it's called **adaptation**. When you introduce a new stimulus to your body (such as lifting), you are forcing it to take action and adapt to that stress. You get stronger, bigger, faster, etc. But, once your body gets used to that stress, it won't have a reason to further develop because it's capable of handling it right now.

This is why progressive overload is so important. **You need to be introducing more stress to your body on a regular basis to force it to adapt and strengthen over and over again.** This is the foundation of ongoing progress. Now, there are many ways to achieve progressive overload, here are 8:

- 1) Lifting the same weight with a better range of motion.

- 2) Lifting the same weight with smoother form, more speed and less effort.

- 3) Lifting heavier weight.

- 4) Lifting the same weight but with less rest between sets.

- 5) Lifting the same weight for more repetitions.

- 6) Maintaining performance while losing body weight(increasing relative performance).

- 7) Doing the same workout in a shorter amount of time.

- 8) Lifting the same weight for the same repetitions for more sets.

What's the bottom line?

As you can see, there are many different ways to progress and numbers on the bar aren't the only indicator of that. But, keep in mind that progressive overload comes only after good form. **No one is going to be impressed with a 405-pound half-squat.**

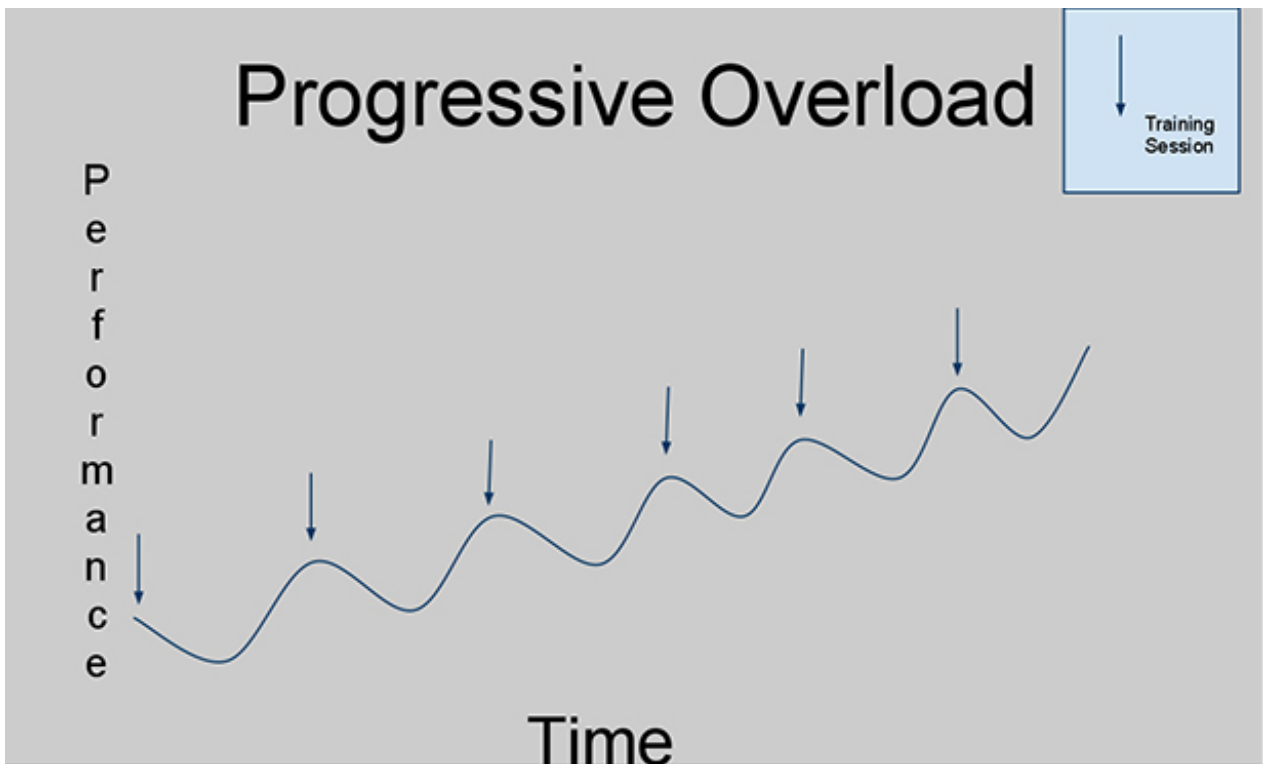
What progressive overload looks like:

A lot of people have this false perception that they should be getting stronger on a weekly basis. This is not the case. In fact, **progressive overload will never be linear and as fun** as it is during the [newbie phase](#) of training. No improvement, be it gaining strength, speed or [increasing work capacity](#) is ever going to be linear. Adaptations of your body to these outside stressors are unpredictable. Sometimes you'll make big jumps easy, while other times you may stall for weeks.

Think about it from this logical standpoint:

If you could add 5 pounds on your bench press from week to week, every year your bench would increase by 260 pounds. And even though that would be awesome, it won't happen. Adding such an enormous load on your bench max is going to take a lot more than a year to achieve.

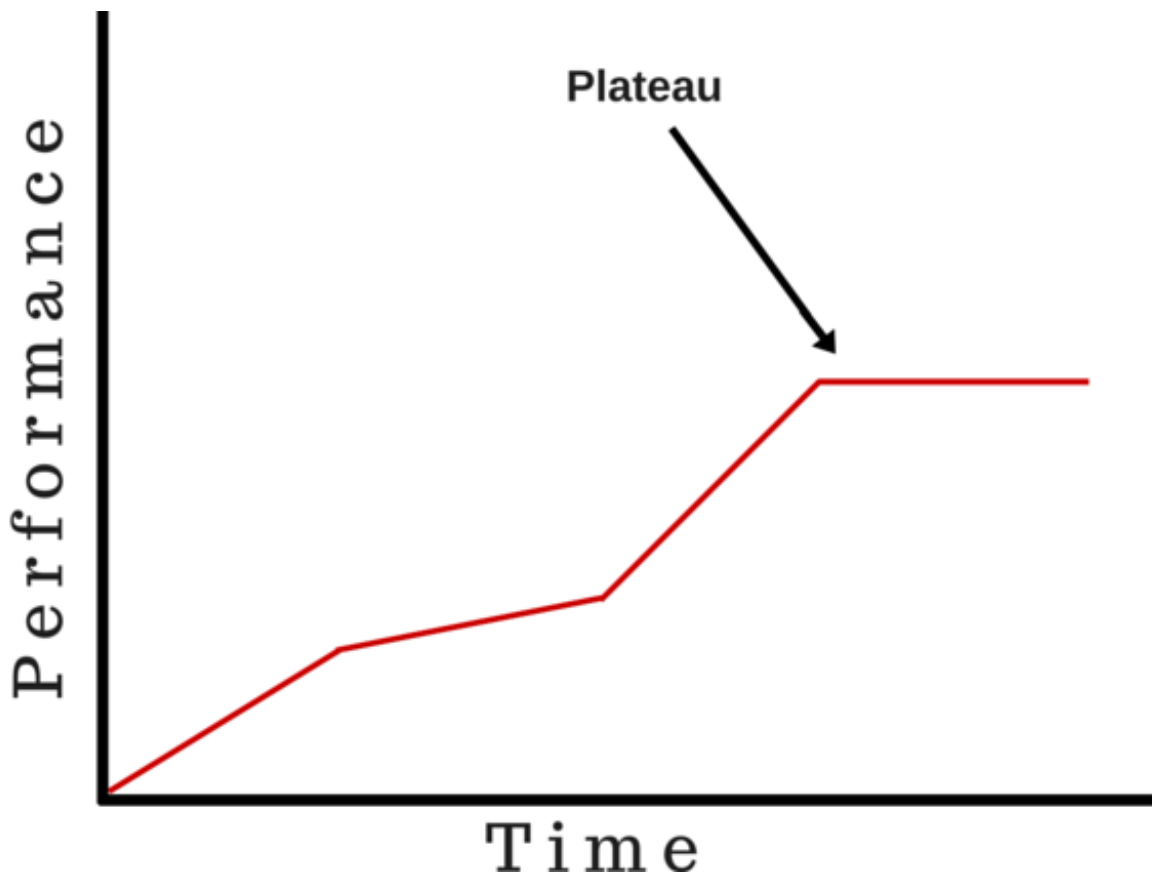
Here is a chart that illustrates what realistic progress actually looks like:



Learn How to Overcome Weightlifting Plateaus and Make Progress Year-Round

Before we dissect the top 5 ways to break through a weightlifting plateau, let's first define what it is:

A weightlifting plateau is a state in which the trainee cannot make any progress with their training. They are stuck within a certain weight and cannot continue overloading. How long the progress stall lasts before we can consider it a weightlifting plateau depends on each individual. Their goals, training experience, current strength level and lifestyle all play a role.



For example:

An elite powerlifter will need to train for an entire year just to add 5-10 pounds to their squat. Yet, if you can only squat 200 pounds now, you should be able to add 5-10 pounds on that every few weeks. For the average lifter, I'd say anything longer than four weeks can be considered a plateau.

Now, let's take a look at some common plateau questions that you first need to answer. Then, we'll dive into the top 5 tactics to break your plateau:

Question #1: Is my diet on point and what's happening with my body weight?

Needless to say, you need to be eating enough calories to supply your body with energy to repair itself and grow. I won't get into calorie and macronutrient tracking here. I suggest you read my "[8 Reasons Why 95% of People Fail to Lose Fat \(and How to Avoid Them\)](#)" eBook where I went in-depth in the topic of proper nutrition for fat loss and muscle growth.

Also, let's assume that you've plateaued for more than 4 weeks. How has your body weight changed in the last month? Has it gone up, is it the same or has it gone down. If you're gaining weight over time but aren't making progress in the gym, we can move to question #2.

Question #2: Am I overreaching and need a break?

Are you feeling [over trained](#)? Having trouble sleeping? Feeling sore and tired all the time? Lost motivation to train? Having many bad workouts in a row? Well, if your answer is yes to most of these questions, chances are you're overreached and need a break.

If you're feeling energetic and lack of motivation isn't the problem, let's continue with question #3.

Question #3: How long have I been in this plateau?

As I wrote above, this is individual. For most lifters in the intermediate zone, anything more than **3-4 full weeks of no progress** should be a worrying sign that something is wrong

Question #4: Have I plateaued on all exercises or just one to two (i.e. can this be due to bad form, weak points, etc.)?

A friend of mine recently reached out to me asking if I could help him with his bench press plateau. He said that he was feeling great and all his exercises were improving... but his bench press. After seeing a few of his working sets, we diagnosed his issue. His elbows were somewhat flared out. He wasn't using leg drive. And he was having trouble locking the weight on top (usually the cause of weak triceps).

Not being able to make progress on just one or two similar exercises is a good sign that the problem is hiding within that specific movement pattern. Whether your technique needs improvement or you have weak points holding you back, **you need to start from within to fix the issue.**

Question #5: Is my program solid or does it need improvement?

This is kind of a broad question to ask yourself but a necessary one, none the least. If the structure of your training program is plain bad, you need to change it, fast. If you've read everything so far, you should have a good idea of what a proper program looks like.

Take an honest look at your routine and try to spot where it fails to deliver. Tweak small things or make complete overhauls if you have to. If you don't, you'll waste your time without having anything to show for your hard effort.

Now that we've covered the questions, let's dive into the 5 tactics to break a plateau:

1. Eat more calories and track your body weight over time.

Before you do anything else, make sure that you're eating enough food. Just as a house requires building materials to be developed, so does your body. You can't build muscle if you're not eating enough, it's as simple as that.

English BMR Formula

Women: $BMR = 655 + (4.35 \times \text{weight in pounds}) + (4.7 \times \text{height in inches}) - (4.7 \times \text{age in years})$

Men: $BMR = 66 + (6.23 \times \text{weight in pounds}) + (12.7 \times \text{height in inches}) - (6.8 \times \text{age in year})$

Metric BMR Formula

Women: $BMR = 655 + (9.6 \times \text{weight in kilos}) + (1.8 \times \text{height in cm}) - (4.7 \times \text{age in years})$

Men: $BMR = 66 + (13.7 \times \text{weight in kilos}) + (5 \times \text{height in cm}) - (6.8 \times \text{age in years})$

Source: <http://www.bmi-calculator.net/bmr-calculator/bmr-formula.php>

I recommend calculating your maintenance level calories and adding 200-300 above that number. **I don't recommend using any of the online calculators because they are often inaccurate.** Instead, use the formula below to calculate your BMR:

Harris Benedict Formula

To determine your total daily calorie needs, multiply your **BMR** by the appropriate activity factor, as follows:

- If you are sedentary (little or no exercise) : $\text{Calorie-Calculation} = BMR \times 1.2$
- If you are lightly active (light exercise/sports 1-3 days/week) : $\text{Calorie-Calculation} = BMR \times 1.375$
- If you are moderately active (moderate exercise/sports 3-5 days/week) : $\text{Calorie-Calculation} = BMR \times 1.55$
- If you are very active (hard exercise/sports 6-7 days a week) : $\text{Calorie-Calculation} = BMR \times 1.725$
- If you are extra active (very hard exercise/sports & physical job or 2x training) : $\text{Calorie-Calculation} = BMR \times 1.9$

Source: <http://www.bmi-calculator.net/bmr-calculator/harris-benedict-equation/>

Once you have your BMR number, multiply it by the number which best describes you:

Furthermore, keep track of your body weight and see how it changes over time. Your aim is to gain 2 to 4 pounds of weight every month. If you're more advanced, aim for 2 pounds. As long as your weight is going up, you can move to the other tactics.

2. Deload or have a complete week off training.

Yes, overtraining is quite real and anyone can fall into that trap. Sometimes the severity of the symptoms is so bad that it doesn't just affect your workouts.

You can't sleep well.

You're tired and edgy all the time.

You have low or no sex drive.

Your joints and tendons feel achy.

You lack the motivation to train.

Your warm-ups are challenging enough to warrant a full workout.

These are some of the most commonly seen symptoms of overtraining you should be looking out for. You see, training is quite taxing on your body both physically and mentally. And after training for weeks and weeks without

taking a break, that fatigue accumulates and you start feeling over trained. This is where a full week off training or deload week should come to place.

A recovery week is one where you don't go to the gym for an entire week and focus on recovery.

A [deload week](#), is one where you scale down your workouts by reducing training volume, training intensity or both by about 50%. This means doing half of what you do in terms of total sets and weight lifted. During that week, there will be no training to failure and no personal PR attempts. Practice good form, have a quick workout and leave.

The difference between the two types of recovery weeks isn't big. Depending on how much you scale down your training on a deload week, it could be almost like a rest week. But, I recommend a deload week for those of you who have trouble staying away from the gym and not lifting for a whole week seems absurd.

But, if you can get out of the gym with no problem and you are feeling quite over trained, then you should take a recovery week.

3.Improve your technique and work on your weak points.

Just like my friend had plateaued on the bench press due to improper leg drive and elbow flare, you too can be stuck because of form issues. I recommend getting someone who has experience to review your form and point out any mistakes you could be making.

You can also watch instructional YouTube videos and try to recreate proper form in the gym. Go a step further and record some of your sets just to see how you look from the side.

Often times, these seemingly unbreakable plateaus can be caused by something minor and a few simple tweaks could help you get past them.

Weak points are another common reason why you could be plateauing on a certain exercise. I recommend you read [this](#).

4.Improve your program or follow one that has proven itself effective.

Sometimes the entirety of the program you're following might be the issue and that is alright. You can change a lot of things and design it to suit your needs. If a program is boring and ineffective, it's your job to change it with something that challenges you and forces growth. After all, adherence to the program is a big factor for long term success.

You can follow my guidelines and see where your routine falls short. Also, you can find a tried and true program that has worked for hundreds of people before you.

I recommend checking out [Beyond 5/3/1](#) by Jim Wendler or [The Conjugate Method](#). Both of these have a proven track record of success and yours can be the next one.

5.Put more effort into your training.

Let me explain why I added this as one of the 5 tactics. You see, we often start something new (in our case a new program, split, etc.) with energy and enthusiasm. But after some time passes, we kind of lose interest or drive to perform and fall into this comfortable zone. We exert a certain amount of effort but not too much that we challenge ourselves to leave that comfort zone we've created.

In other words, we get lazy.

I've been guilty of this myself and I know a lot of people who have fallen in this trap. Sure, you're pushing yourself in the gym but not as hard as you think you are.

"Oh better stop this set now, I don't want to get over trained."

“I don’t think I’m up for squatting 225 pounds today.”

“Last week I benched 275 pounds for 6. I can take it easy today.”

There are just three of the many limiting thoughts that pop up and we can fall for them if we’re not careful.

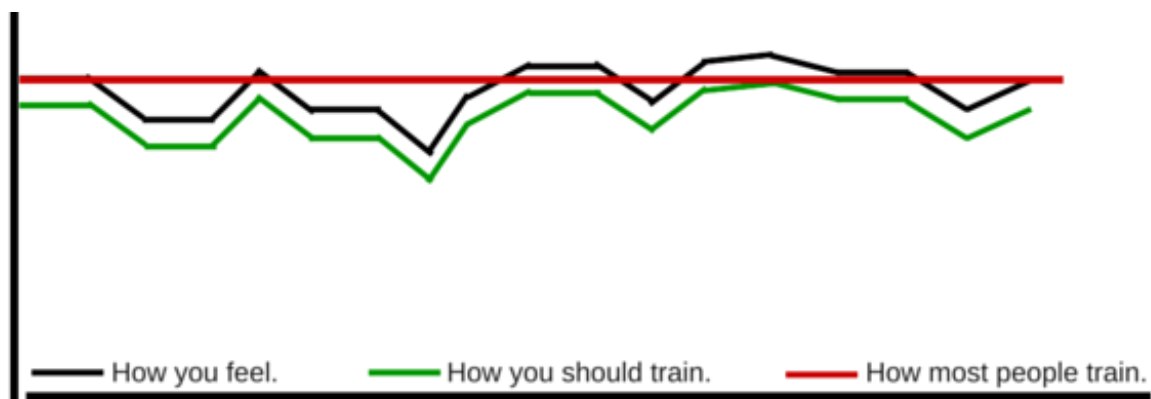
So, here is my challenge to you:

The next time you’re doing an exercise with the same weight as the week before, dare to push it for one or two more repetitions. Chances are, you’re NOT going to reach muscle failure and completely wreck your central nervous system.

If you can, try to match the repetitions for the remaining sets on that exercise. It might not feel like much but those extra reps are going to make a big difference over time.

Aim for small improvements each workout and don’t fall into the comfort zone and wonder why you aren’t making progress. The power to change is in your own!

Learn How to Master This Often Ignored Aspect of Training



Autoregulation. I’m sure you’ve heard this term once or twice before and for a good reason – it matters.

You see, most people assume that your performance is going to be linear with a slight trajectory upwards over time. But, if you’ve been lifting for more than a few months, I can bet that you’ve experienced all sorts of days – good, bad and ugly. And having low energy sucks. But it’s important to understand for the sake of your longevity in the gym that **those days happen**.

This is why you’ll hear the term ‘auto regulation’ from a seasoned lifter, rather than from a gym newbie. The experienced lifter has learned that listening to your body is important. Trying to push through bad days is a bone-headed move.

Listening to your body applies to good days, as well. Sometimes we are fortunate. We get to the gym and we feel great. The weight we lift seems somewhat light and we can add more. But, there are also the bad days. Warm-up feels tiring. We’re not in the mood. We’re scattered all over the place, unmotivated. And weights that we could usually lift for 5-6 repetitions, we now can’t do more than 2-3.

On such a day, don’t beat yourself up. Lower down the weight on each set by 5-10% and do that for each exercise in your workout. There is no point trying to match your performance from the week before if that comes at the expense of good form.

There are other times where you might feel like you’re not up to the challenge, but after one or two working sets, you start feeling the rush of energy flowing through you. What is important is to listen to your body and adjust your workouts accordingly. Backing off is tough to do, especially if you’re an overachiever, but is a necessary

step to take once in a while.

How to Warm Up, Decrease Joint Wear and Risk of Potential Injury

Before I wrap this guide up, I'd like to say a few words on warming up. This is, perhaps, one of the most important aspects of training:

- It improves your mobility and flexibility, leading to better execution of each exercise.
- It increases your core body temperature, warms up your muscles and synovial fluid for less joint wear and more stability.
- Decreases your risk of injury when training with heavy weights.
- Primes your mind and body for the work you're about to do.

A good warm-up will lift your mood, increase your energy and performance. A bad warm-up will leave you lethargic, unmotivated, stiff and prone to injury.

I've been in both camps and I can say with absolute confidence:

Warming up well for 10-15 minutes is the best investment of your time. Even if the following workout isn't your best, a good warm-up is a must.

Since warming up is such an important aspect of lifting, there have been many suggestions made about what a good warm up actually is. The truth is, there is no one perfect way to warm up. As long as your warm-up achieves the 4 things I listed above, you're doing well.

But, I will give you some pointers about what a proper warm-up looks like and how to design one for yourself.

A good warm-up consists of two parts: General and specific.

General warm-up

Low-intensity cardio for 5-10 minutes (treadmill, jump rope, stair master, elliptical trainer, etc.)

Your goal here is to raise your body temperature, get your heart rate up and warm up your synovial fluid (as mentioned above). Whole body dynamic drills are also great to do at this point.

Specific warm-up

Once you've raised your body temperature, it's time to take a step further and give extra attention to the joints you're about to work.

Here is a video by Scott Herman demonstrating a great warm-up routine for the shoulders (that takes less than 5 minutes):

For example:

If you bench 225 lbs for 5 reps, working your way up would look like this:

(Keep in mind that you should never take a warm-up set to failure. Only do as many reps as you feel comfortable with.)

Set 1 (warm-up): 45 lbs (bar only) for 15-25 reps

Set 2 (warm-up): 95 lbs for 6-8 reps

Set 3 (warm-up): 135 lbs for 5 reps

Set 4 (warm-up): 180 lbs for 3 reps

Set 5 (first working set): 225 lbs for 5 reps

The goal of the specific warm-up is to activate your muscles, stabilize your joints, and prime your nervous system.