



A COMPLETE BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO THE GYM

Everything you need to start lifting weights and building muscle the right way: a simple, optimal 3-day full-body program, plain-English explanations of the principles that actually drive results, and a quick guide to bulking, cutting, and maingaining so you know which one is right for you.

The Logic: As a beginner, you're in the best position you'll ever be in to make fast progress — almost any sensible program will work if you show up consistently, use good form, and add a little more weight or a rep whenever you can. This guide keeps things simple on purpose: a full-body split trained 3 days a week, built around the big compound lifts, with just enough structure to build a lasting habit without overwhelming you.

WEEKLY OVERVIEW — 3 SESSIONS

Day	Session
Mon	Full Body — Workout 1 (Squat Focus)
Tue	Rest
Wed	Full Body — Workout 2 (Hinge Focus)
Thu	Rest
Fri	Full Body — Workout 3 (Press Focus)
Sat	Rest
Sun	Rest

Each of the 3 weekly sessions is built around a different major compound movement pattern — squat, hip hinge, and press — so across the week you get a well-rounded full-body stimulus without repeating the same heavy barbell lift every session. Every session still trains your whole body; it's just the main lift that rotates. Each main lift also comes with a regression and a progression option, so you can pick the version that matches your current experience and move up the ladder as you get stronger.

THE KEY PRINCIPLES OF LIFTING & GAINING MUSCLE

Progressive Overload	The single most important idea in the entire gym. Muscle grows in response to a demand that's slightly more than what it's used to — so your job every session is to try to beat your last one: a little more weight, one more rep, or one more set. Without this, a workout can feel hard but won't keep building muscle over time. Write your numbers down so you always know what you're trying to beat.
Technique Before Load	Learn the movement pattern before you worry about the weight on the bar. Bad form doesn't just raise your injury risk — it also shifts effort away from the muscle you're trying to train and onto whatever joint or muscle compensates for it. Start light, film yourself from the side, or ask gym staff to glance at your form. Adding weight to a good rep is progress; adding weight to a bad rep is just risk.
Volume & Frequency	You don't need much volume to grow as a beginner. 2-3 sets per exercise, done 3 times a week across a full-body split, is enough — research on untrained lifters (Damas et al., 2016) shows the muscle-building response to a new stimulus is actually larger early in training than it is once you're experienced, meaning beginners get more return from less work. Save higher volumes for later, once basic progress has slowed.
Intensity / Effort	On your main compound lift each session, leave 2-3 reps in reserve (RIR) rather than training to complete failure. While you're still learning the lifts, technique is the first thing to break down as fatigue builds near failure — stopping a couple of reps short keeps every rep clean and protects your joints, without meaningfully costing you any muscle growth at this stage. Simpler machine and isolation accessories carry much less technical risk, so those can be pushed closer to failure (0-2 RIR).
Rest Between Sets	2-3 minutes on the day's main compound lift (squat, hinge, or press), at least 90 seconds on everything else. Longer rest lets you lift more weight for more reps across your working sets, which matters more for long-term progress than rushing between sets to feel out of breath.
Rep Ranges & Exercise Choice	Build your program around compound (multi-joint) lifts — squat, hip hinge, and a pressing movement. These move the most muscle mass at once and let you add load fastest, so they give you the most result for the least time in the gym. Roughly 5-12 reps per set on these builds both strength and size effectively. Each compound in this guide comes with a regression and a progression — a lighter, more forgiving version to learn the pattern on, and a heavier version to move up to once you're confident. Machine exercises are mixed in throughout too: they guide the bar path for you, so they're a safe, low-skill way to add extra volume and explore new exercises while you're still building confidence with free weights.
Recovery & Sleep	Muscle is built during recovery, not during the workout itself — training breaks the muscle down, sleep and rest days are when it actually rebuilds bigger. Aim for 7-9 hours of sleep and don't train the same muscles on back-to-back days while you're starting out. More is not always better: skipping recovery to train harder or more often usually slows progress rather than speeding it up.
Nutrition Basics	Protein: aim for roughly 1.6 g per kg of bodyweight per day — a 2018 meta-analysis (Morton et al.) found gains in muscle mass plateau around this intake, so more isn't necessarily better. Total calories: whether you gain muscle, lose fat, or do a bit of both depends mostly on your overall calorie balance (covered in detail on the next page). Protein and training set the stage; calories decide the outcome.
Consistency & Tracking	The single biggest predictor of results is showing up consistently for months, not finding the theoretically perfect program. Log your weights and reps every session — it's the only reliable way to know if you're actually progressing. Take progress photos or measurements too, since visible change in the mirror often lags weeks behind the actual muscle you're building.

Key sources: Damas et al. (2016) *J Physiol* — muscle protein synthesis in untrained lifters. Morton et al. (2018) *Br J Sports Med* — protein intake meta-analysis. Longland et al. (2016) *Am J Clin Nutr* — body recomposition in a calorie deficit.

BULKING, CUTTING & MAINGAINING — WHICH ONE DO YOU NEED?

Training tells your body to build muscle. How much food you eat — and specifically whether you're in a calorie surplus, deficit, or right around maintenance — largely decides whether that muscle-building signal turns into new muscle, fat loss, or a bit of both. These are the three main approaches, and when each one makes sense.

BULKING — eat more, build muscle faster

Eating in a calorie surplus, roughly 10-20% above maintenance. More available energy lets your body build new muscle tissue at a faster rate than it could otherwise manage — the trade-off is that some of that surplus is stored as fat too, so a bulk usually means gaining some body fat alongside the muscle. **Choose this if:** you're already reasonably lean and your main goal is to build as much new muscle size and strength as efficiently as possible, and you're comfortable with your weight (and waistline) going up somewhat along the way.

CUTTING — eat less, reveal the muscle you have

Eating in a calorie deficit, roughly 15-25% below maintenance, while keeping protein high and continuing to train hard. This loses fat while preserving as much muscle as possible — you generally can't build much *new* muscle in a deficit, but a well-run cut protects the muscle you already have. **Choose this if:** you're carrying more body fat than you'd like and want to look leaner or improve health markers, either before starting a bulk or simply as your current priority.

MAINGAINING / RECOMPOSITION — slow and steady, both at once

Eating at or very close to maintenance calories, aiming to slowly build a little muscle and lose a little fat at the same time, without big swings in bodyweight either direction. This works best for beginners and returning lifters: Longland et al. (2016) showed that with high protein intake and consistent resistance training, even a calorie deficit didn't stop lean, novice-to-intermediate lifters from gaining muscle. **Choose this if:** you're new to lifting (like this guide is written for), reasonably happy with your current weight, and would rather make slow, steady progress on both fronts than commit to a dedicated bulk or cut right away.

As a rule of thumb: if you're carrying noticeably more body fat than you want, cut first. If you're already lean and want to build size as fast as possible, bulk. If neither applies strongly, or you're brand new to the gym, maingaining lets you build real muscle right away without committing to either extreme.

WORKOUT 1 — SQUAT FOCUS

MONDAY

Squat, shoulders, back, quads, core

~45-60 minutes

Exercise	Sets	Reps	Intensity	Rest
Goblet Squat (regression)	3	10-12	Light-Moderate, 2-3 RIR	90 sec
Box Squat (standard)	3	5-8	Moderate, 2-3 RIR	2-3 min
Barbell Back Squat (progression)	3	5	Moderate, 2-3 RIR	2-3 min
Machine Shoulder Press	3	8-10	1-2 RIR	90 sec
Seated Row Machine	3	8-12	1-2 RIR	90 sec
Leg Extension Machine	2	12-15	0-1 RIR	90 sec
Plank	3	30-45 sec hold	Controlled	60-90 sec

Pick **one** squat variation, not all three — this is a ladder, not a checklist. New to squatting, or working around tight hips/ankles? Start with the goblet squat. Comfortable there? The box squat teaches you to sit back and control depth with a barbell, using the box as a safety net and a depth cue. Once that feels solid, move to the free-standing barbell back squat. Move up a rung every few weeks as the current one starts to feel easy and your form stays clean.

The rest of the session rounds out the whole body: shoulder press and row balance a push and a pull, the leg extension machine adds safe extra quad work, and the plank finishes with some low-fatigue core training. The two machines here are a good way to explore new exercises with a much lower skill and injury barrier than free weights — the machine controls the bar path for you.

WORKOUT 2 — HINGE FOCUS

WEDNESDAY

Hip hinge, legs, back, core

~45-60 minutes

Exercise	Sets	Reps	Intensity	Rest
Dumbbell Romanian Deadlift (regression)	3	8-10	Moderate, 2-3 RIR	2 min
Barbell Romanian Deadlift (standard)	3	6-8	Moderate, 2-3 RIR	2-3 min
Trap Bar Deadlift (progression)	3	5	Moderate, 2-3 RIR	3 min
Leg Press Machine	3	8-12	1-2 RIR	2 min
Lat Pulldown Machine	3	8-10	1-2 RIR	90 sec
Leg Curl Machine	2	12-15	0-1 RIR	90 sec
Hanging Knee Raise	3	10-15	Controlled	60-90 sec

Again, pick **one** hinge variation. The dumbbell Romanian deadlift is the safest place to start — it's far more forgiving on the lower back than a barbell conventional deadlift while you're still learning to feel the hamstring stretch and keep a flat back. Once that's second nature, move to a barbell RDL for more load, and later a trap bar deadlift, which uses a more upright torso position and is generally an easier, safer bar path than a conventional barbell deadlift for a beginner who's ready to lift heavier.

The leg press and leg curl machines add safe, guided lower-body volume without demanding the balance and bracing a free-weight squat or hinge requires, and the lat pulldown machine builds the same vertical-pulling back strength as a pull-up without needing the bodyweight strength to do one yet.

WORKOUT 3 — PRESS FOCUS

FRIDAY

Chest, shoulders, back, arms

~45-60 minutes

Exercise	Sets	Reps	Intensity	Rest
Machine Chest Press (regression)	3	8-10	Moderate, 2-3 RIR	2 min
Dumbbell Bench Press (standard)	3	8-10	Moderate, 2-3 RIR	2 min
Barbell Bench Press (progression)	3	5	Moderate, 2-3 RIR	2-3 min
Seated Cable Row	3	8-12	1-2 RIR	90 sec
Dumbbell Lateral Raise	2	12-15	0-1 RIR	90 sec
Dumbbell Bicep Curl	2	10-15	0-1 RIR	90 sec
Triceps Pushdown	2	10-15	0-1 RIR	90 sec

One more ladder, one more pick: the machine chest press is the easiest place to start — the machine fixes the bar path and supports your body for you, so there's no stabilization or balance to learn and no spotter needed, just the pressing motion itself. Once that feels easy, dumbbell bench press is the next step up: each arm now has to stabilize and move independently, which builds more control, and if a rep goes wrong you can simply lower the dumbbells to your sides instead of getting stuck under a bar. Barbell bench press is the final progression once you're confident with pressing mechanics — ideally in a rack with safety bars, or with a spotter.

The cable row balances out the pressing with a pull, lateral raises and curls/pushdowns give the shoulders and arms some direct, low-risk isolation work to round out the week.

Same progression rule applies across all 3 workouts: add a little weight whenever you complete every prescribed rep with good form. When a lift stalls for 2-3 sessions in a row, that's your cue to take a lighter "deload" session or start adding smaller increments.