

Strength training is an important part of an overall fitness program. Here's what strength training can do for you — and how to get started.

[By Mayo Clinic Staff](#)

Want to reduce body fat, increase lean muscle mass and burn calories more efficiently? Strength training to the rescue! Strength training is a key component of overall health and fitness for everyone.

Use it or lose it

Lean muscle mass naturally diminishes with age.

You'll increase the percentage of fat in your body if you don't do anything to replace the lean muscle you lose over time. Strength training can help you preserve and enhance your muscle mass at any age.

Strength training may also help you:

- **Develop strong bones.** By stressing your bones, strength training can increase bone density and reduce the risk of osteoporosis.
- **Manage your weight.** Strength training can help you manage or lose weight, and it can increase your metabolism to help you burn more calories.
- **Enhance your quality of life** Strength training may enhance your quality of life and improve your ability to do everyday activities. Building muscle also can contribute to better balance and may reduce your risk of falls. This can help you maintain independence as you age.
- **Manage chronic conditions.** Strength training can reduce the signs and symptoms of many chronic conditions, such as arthritis, back pain, obesity, heart disease, depression and diabetes.
- **Sharpen your thinking skills.** Some research suggests that regular strength training and aerobic exercise may help improve thinking and learning skills for older adults.

Consider the options

Strength training can be done at home or in the gym. Common choices include:

- **Body weight.** You can do many exercises with little or no equipment. Try pushups, pullups, planks and leg squats.
- **Resistance tubing.** Resistance tubing is inexpensive, lightweight tubing that provides resistance when stretched. You can choose from many types of resistance tubes in nearly any sporting goods store.
- **Free weights.** Barbells and dumbbells are classic strength training tools. If you don't have weights at home, you can use soup cans.
- **Weight machines.** Most fitness centers offer various resistance machines. You can invest in weight machines for use at home, too.

Getting started

If you have a chronic condition, or if you're older than age 40 and you haven't been active recently, check with your doctor before beginning a strength training or aerobic fitness program.

Before beginning strength training, consider warming up with brisk walking or another aerobic activity for five or 10 minutes. Cold muscles are more prone to injury than are warm muscles.

Choose a weight or resistance level heavy enough to tire your muscles after about 12 to 15 repetitions. When you can easily do more repetitions of a certain exercise, gradually increase the weight or resistance.

Research shows that a single set of 12 to 15 repetitions with the proper weight can build muscle efficiently in most people and can be as effective as three sets of the same exercise.

To give your muscles time to recover, rest one full day between exercising each specific muscle group.

Also be careful to listen to your body. If a strength training exercise causes pain, stop the exercise. Consider trying a lower weight or trying it again in a few days.

It's important to use proper technique in strength training to avoid injuries. If you're new to weight training, work with a trainer or other fitness specialist to learn correct form and technique. Remember to breathe as you strength train.

When to expect results

You don't need to spend hours a day lifting weights to benefit from strength training. You can see significant improvement in your strength with just two or three 20- or 30-minute weight training sessions a week.

The Department of Health and Human Services recommends incorporating strength training exercises for all major muscle groups into a fitness routine at least two times a week.

As you incorporate strength training exercises into your fitness routine, you may notice improvement in your strength over time. As your muscle mass increases, you'll likely be able to lift weight more easily and for longer periods of time. If you keep it up, you can continue to increase your strength, even if you're not in shape when you begin.