

## THE TOTAL BEGINNERS' GUIDE TO FITNESS AND WEIGHTLIFTING



So, for whatever reason, you've decided to get fit and healthy. Or maybe you're fit and healthy already, but you'd like to change the way in which you keep fit, and maybe pack on some muscle. Whatever your motives, this guide is written as an introduction to lifting weights, also known as 'resistance training'. It is not a "complete guide", there is an awful lot to say about how, when, why and what to lift, pull or push during a workout – the time spent exercising – much more than can be packed into a simple leaflet. The 'total' in the title therefore refers more to 'beginners' than to 'guide'!

### **You what?**

Before you start lifting weights, you want to know what different things are called. These are a few basic terms that you're likely to come across from the very beginning:

**Workout:** the time you spent exercising. Mostly used to refer to resistance training, but a workout can also involve *cardio* training.

**Programme:** A list of exercises, *sets* and *reps*, which you perform – usually in the order they are written down – during your *workout*.

**Set:** A number of reps that makes up a *set*. If you have an exercise which you are doing for "2 *sets* of 10 *reps*" that means that you are doing the exercise, i.e. lift the weight, 10 times in a row, then take a rest of between 30 seconds and 2 minutes, and then repeat the exercise another 10 times.

**Rep:** Short for "repetition", it means the one individual count of the exercise done. See *set* for example.

**Machine weights:** weights that are incorporated into some kind of contraption, on which you sit, lie down or stand up. While more advanced weight lifters will often prefer *free weights*, machine weights are often recommended for beginners. As your movements on these weights are more restricted, they help you perform the exercise correctly and prevent injuries. However, before starting any exercise on any machine, ask a qualified instructor to show you how it's done and observe you doing the exercise yourself.

**Free weights:** weights that are not attached to any machine.

**Barbell:** A type of *free weight*, consisting of a (4 to 6 feet long) bar, with *plates* on either end. Sometimes these are fixed, i.e. they won't come off. For most exercises you will want a barbell with adjustable weights though, i.e. plates that you can put on and take off yourself. Most gyms will have both types of barbells.

**Plate:** A disc of a certain weight, there is one at each side of the *barbell* (if you ever see anyone wanting to lift a barbell with only one plate on it, don't take any advice of them!). Plates can vary in weight from 1 to many many kilos. It might seem obvious, but the plates on each side of the barbell should be of equal weight.

**Dumbbell:** A smaller, handheld version of the *barbell*. These usually have fixed plates on them, although dumbbells with adjustable plates do exist. Most gyms will only have the fixed weight variety.

**Cardio:** short for "cardio-vascular", meaning "heart and bloodvessels". Someone "doing cardio" is doing exercise that increases the heart rate and the amount of blood that is pumped through the bloodvessels, such as running, cycling or swimming.



### **Working out:**

A typical workout will start with a warm-up, then stretch, work out, cool-down and final stretch. A warm-up and cool-down generally will consist of a few minutes of exercise on cardio equipment, such as a stationary bike or treadmill. A warm-up is so called because it serves to warm up your muscles and prepare them for exercise. Doing a workout, whether it be cardio or resistance, without having done a warm-up first is asking for injuries! Many people stretch their muscles after their warm-up, and it is often advised to do so. However, there is also much discussion about the usefulness of pre-workout stretching. In any case, it won't hurt, so stretch after your warm-up to be on the safe side.

There are as many different ways of working out as there are people, and what works for one person might not work for another. It really isn't possible to just write down a "one size fits all", general workout. One thing that most, if not all, people will agree on though, is that you should never attempt to workout without having had proper instruction on how to do different exercises and use of equipment.

A few minutes cool-down afterwards again helps muscles that you've exercised during the beginning of the workout, to warm up sufficiently to be stretched. There is a bit of a debate going on about the usefulness of a cool-down as well. Some people swear by it, others don't bother. Again, it won't hurt you, so do a few minutes' cool-down at the end of your workout.

Whereas other parts of a workout might generate a bit of discussion about their use, everybody will agree that stretching after a workout is important. Stretching after your workout will help your muscles to recover more quickly, and reduce muscle soreness the day after – although it won't prevent it entirely. But more importantly, it also plays a part in injury prevention, so don't skip a good stretch of all the muscles you've worked at the end!



**How often?** You might know, or heard of, people who spend every waking hour in the gym, doing 3 to 4 hour workouts, go home for a snack that looks more like a family-size meal and then go back to the gym for more! Rest assured, in order to get fit and healthy, and even add some more muscle, you do not need to give up the rest of your life – although you might become a "gym-addict"!

Strength training needs to be done properly and consistently. Most gyms have their share of (usually) guys who, grunting and growling, move their whole body in order to perform a biceps (arm) curl. Fact is, that improper form is not going to help you achieve your goals, but is more likely to either lead you nowhere, or cause injury. Basically, if you can't move a weight by using proper form, then the weight is too heavy, and you should switch to a lighter weight. Now you want to move those heavier weights, right? That leads us to the other important factor: consistency. In order for your body to grow and develop fitness, you need to train consistently. It's no use to go every day of the week, and work out for 3 hours a day, for 2 weeks and then not do anything for 2 weeks. If you have managed to build up anything in those 2 weeks, you will have lost it before you hit the gym again. While different training schedules work for different people, an average guideline could be to do strength training 3 times a week and a cardio workout, such as running or cycling, once a week.

**Injuries and illnesses:** You might have an injury, condition or illness that could be affected by doing strength training. Always let people, such as instructors, know if you have anything, however small, that you think might be affected. If you feel pain while doing an exercise, STOP! Pain is a sign that something in your body is not right, and your not doing yourself any favours by ignoring it. Continuing might well aggravate an injury. If you have a condition that might be affected by exercise, always check with your GP first, before you start.

**Joining a gym versus training at home:** Most of us won't have the space or the money to set up a home gym. While a mat, a skipping rope and a couple of dumbbells might not cost you the earth in money or space, you are likely to become dissatisfied with the equipment you've got and the possibilities it gives you.

A gym will give you the possibility to use a variety of equipment to workout with, as well as the added bonus of qualified instructors who can advise you on exercises as well as the right way to perform them. Particularly the last one is really important, if you want to get anything out of your training, as well as prevent injury.

**A word about gyms:** With "getting fit and healthy" being the latest rage, gyms are popping up left, right and centre. It's almost easier to find a gym than a chippy (not necessarily a bad thing!), and with this many of them about, many gyms will do their best to convince you that they are better than the competition.

The best advice I can give you is: be choosy about the gym you join. Visit a few gyms and take your time looking around. If there is anything about the place you don't like, be it the look of it, the facilities, the instructors or the atmosphere, don't let yourself get talked into joining. After the first week you won't go back, I promise you that.

Gyms charge a monthly membership fee, which can vary from £20 to well over £100 a month, if you happen to live in Central London and go to one of the posh clubs. On top of that most will charge you a joining fee. All in all, they're asking you to part with a considerable amount of money, and you should be getting something for that in return. Check the facilities and classes: what is included in the price? First paying a lot of money to use a gym and then discovering that you're expected to pay for classes on top of that isn't nice.

Are the instructors all qualified and, just as important: will they be available for advice and help after your induction? All gyms will offer you an induction; it is part of their way of covering themselves against a lawsuit, should you injure yourself whilst working out without having been shown the proper way of using equipment. Basically it's as much to protect you as well as themselves, so don't fall for the "Free Induction!" line. It's what they should provide you with anyway.

But, will advice and help be available for you, at no extra cost, once you've had your induction?



You're bound to be a bit overwhelmed by all the information and instructions, and the next time you come to the gym you might want an instructor to show you again how to use equipment or watch you use it, to make sure you're doing it right. Making sure you're performing each exercise correctly is half the battle (we get to the other half in a bit!). A good gym has got qualified instructors "on the floor", i.e. the fitness area, all the time, who are there for you to give advice and offer help. Don't hesitate to ask about qualifications, a good gym will appreciate you being thorough and happy to tell you about their qualified staff.

"Personal training" is the word now in many gyms. Better results are said to be achieved with the help of someone who closely watches your programme as well as your each and every move whilst in the gym. While this might be true, it is also true that this service generally costs a minimum of £20 an hour – of which the gyms often receive a considerable portion. Unless you need close, personal supervision, and/or have that kind of money to spend on a personal trainer, it really isn't necessary when you just

start working out. It is entirely possible to achieve good results without paying for personal training. Many people work out for years without ever feeling the need to have it. In many gyms a personal trainer is often the same person as the instructor, but just wearing a different shirt!

Because of the stiff competition, many gyms will have promotions going on, such as a month's free membership, reduction or no joining fee, etc. Some gyms have even been seen to offer crates of beer and mobile phones in order to get new members. It goes without saying that a good gym will rather pride itself on its excellent facilities and well-trained staff! Many gyms will, however, be quite willing to negotiate their fees. If you like the place, and you're met by friendly instructors who are willing to take their time for you, then join no matter what they charge, as long as you can afford it. Regard it as an investment in your physical and mental health.

**Fitness and diet:** Working out properly and consistently is half the battle on your way to become fitter, stronger and more muscular (if that's what you'd want). Following a proper, healthy diet is the other half. While a vegan diet as such might be considered healthier than a diet that contains animal products, there are still enough foods that are both suitable for vegans and bad for your health. Take baked beans on toast for instance. Ostensibly vegan, but it will hardly contain anything else but sugar and starch. Basically, the more processed food is, the fewer nutrients it will contain and more of what you don't really need. The best foods have no labels! In other words: eat plenty of fruit and vegetables, and eat them raw (i.e. uncooked) if you can. And don't forget nuts and seeds. They are jam-packed with all sorts of useful nutrients, above all Essential Fatty Acids (EFAs). As the name already says, they are essential in a healthy diet. Many people who want to lose weight and/or get fitter, religiously cut out all the fat in their diet. However, your body needs some fat, but it depends entirely on the kind of fats you are taking whether they are going to have a good or bad effect on your health. Again, it's the processed or heated fats that are not good for your body, and the natural, unprocessed fats that are. So cut out the bad fats and pay attention to the good fats instead!

When eating pasta or grains, such as rice, take the brown, whole-wheat variety rather than the refined, white one. Try to eat as varied as possible; there is a whole range of grains out there, besides brown pasta. Quinoa, millet and amaranth are but a few examples of nutritious alternatives.

And last but not least: drink water! A whole lot of it, basically as much as you can manage, but a minimum of 4 pints a day – and that's besides any other liquid you might be drinking during the day (so no, your cuppa in the morning does not count towards your 4 pints, unless, off course, it contains just filtered water!).

There is an awful lot to say about nutrition and a healthy diet. If you'd like to read more and you have internet access, check out [www.veganbodybuilding.org](http://www.veganbodybuilding.org) for lots more info on nutrition and a whole lot of other, strength training related, topics.

**And last but not least:** Rest! Your muscles don't grow while your working them heavily in the gym. They need rest in order to heal and develop. Therefore, a good night's sleep is just as important as a good, consistent workout routine. A minimum of 8 hours sleep gives your body time to recover and grow. There's never been such a good reason for having a lie-in!

#### **The whole story summarised:**

- Work out properly and consistently
- If in any doubt about a condition or injury, consult your GP before you start working out
- If you're joining a gym, be choosy about which one you pick
- Eat healthy, have fresh fruit and vegetables every day
- Drink plenty of water
- Rest

And most of all: Have fun! Working out should be a good experience, not a chore. There is little point in doing something you don't enjoy. If you don't enjoy what you're doing, you might want to look at getting a different programme, doing some classes or training with a friend etc.

Hopefully this leaflet has given you a bit of an idea what strength training is all about. If you have any questions or want to know more, there are many good books on the subject, and/or check [www.veganbodybuilding.org](http://www.veganbodybuilding.org), a website and mailing list for and by vegan strength athletes.

See you there!

