Getting Stronger: How to Break Through Strength Plateaus

If you're serious about building a great physique, you need to be getting stronger over time.

Why?

Well, aside from the awesome feeling you get when you lift serious poundage, being strong generally allows you to build more muscle.

You see, doing sets of 8 with 225 pounds on the bench press is going to build your chest nicely. But do you know what is better?

Doing sets of 8 with 275 pounds.

Even better?

Doing sets of 8 with 315 pounds.

In today's guide, we'll go over everything you need to know for optimal strength gains and how to bust through strength plateaus quickly. Let's go.

Not Making Progress or Progressing Slowly?

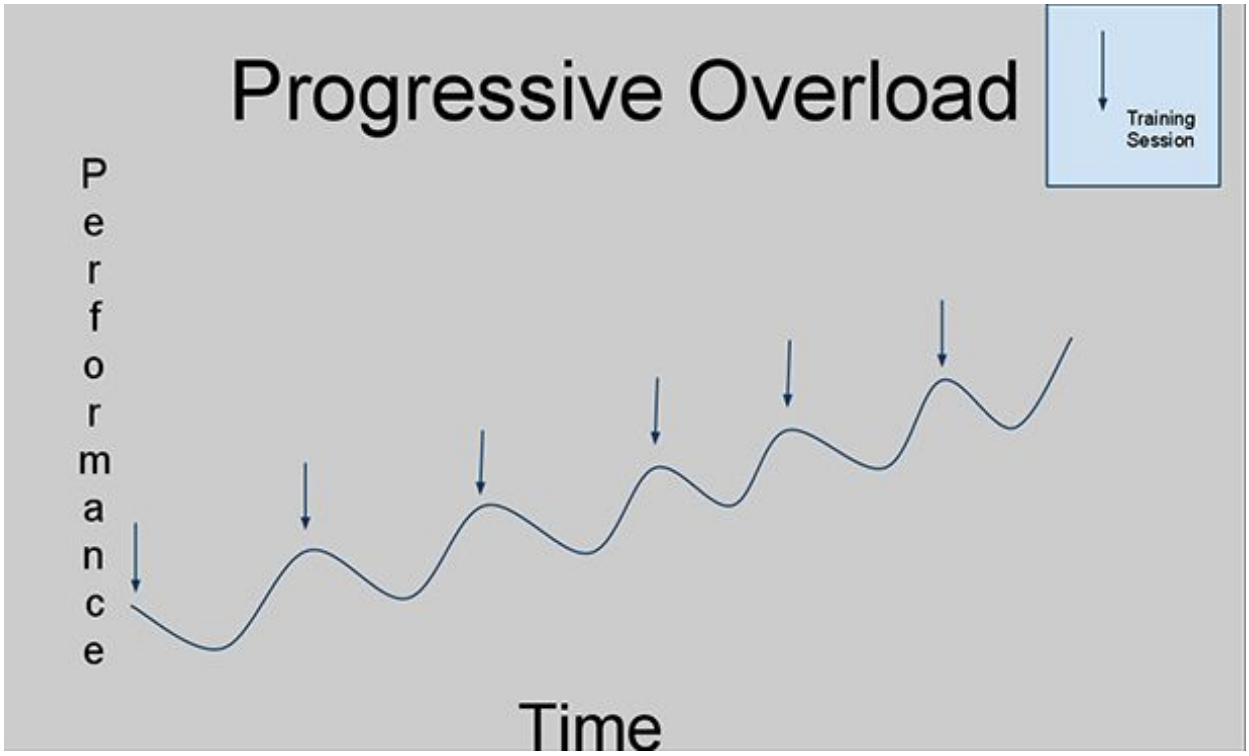
Not getting stronger is a sure way of knowing that you're doing something wrong and need to find what it is.

But often guys confuse their slow progress with an actual weightlifting plateau and the two are not the same.

Slow progress is normal, especially when it comes to strength.

After all, if getting stronger weren't slow, we'd all be benching 1000 lbs by year 5. But, as you can probably guess – this is not the case.

In fact, progress is never linear and you will often feel a bit weaker before the load increases. Here is a chart that illustrates that:



Before we can jump into the solutions of breaking a plateau, we first need to know what we're dealing with. Here are the 7 questions you need to answer:

Question #1: What is your diet like? Do you track macros (the very least protein) and is your body weight going up?

When you first started lifting, you probably made great progress. This is thanks to newbie gains and your nervous system getting used to the movements.

Your strength and muscle gains kept going up from week to week and the feeling was awesome. Even if your diet and training weren't optimal. The exceptions to the rule are only people who started off lifting with a knowledgeable coach by their side.

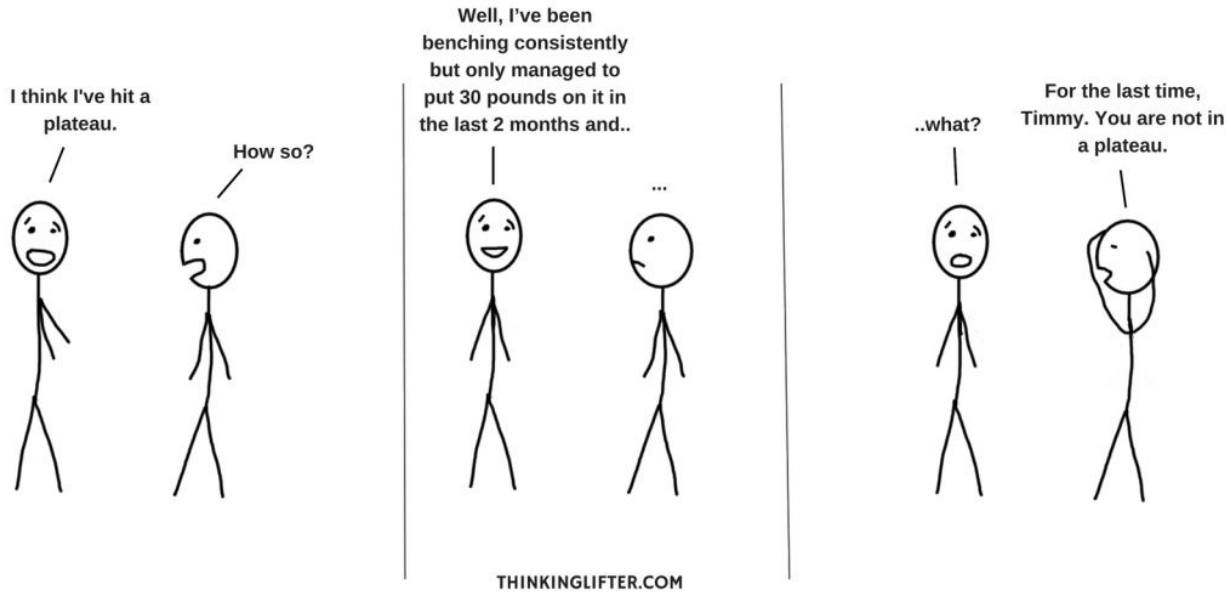
But after a while, once the newbie gains run their course, the fun part ends. This is where most guys plateau because they need to get smart with their diet but often don't know where to begin.

If your body weight is moving up, but strength isn't, we can proceed with the other questions.

Below, we'll take a deeper look at nutrition, bodyweight tracking and how to do it efficiently and accurately.

Question #2: What does your plateau look like? Are you sure you're making NO progress?

Guys often ask me how to get over a lifting plateau. The conversation often goes like this:



Does it sound like you? If it does – don't worry. You haven't hit a plateau. This is how progress looks like after the newbie gains are gone. The more progress you've made, the harder it becomes to acquire further gains.

And you should also keep in mind that progressive overload can be achieved in quite a few ways. Here are some:

- Lifting the same weight with a better range of motion.
- Lifting the same weight with smoother form, more speed, and less effort.
- Lifting the same weight but with less rest between sets.
- Lifting the same weight for more repetitions.
- Maintaining performance while losing body weight(increasing relative performance).
- Doing the same workout in a shorter amount of time.
- Lifting the same weight for the same repetitions, but for more sets.

As you can see, there are many ways to make progress and none of them include **lifting heavier weights**.

Even if you can only do one or two more reps compared to the previous week, it's progress. Don't discount small wins.

But, if the above scenario doesn't describe you and you've made NO progress for more than 3 weeks, don't worry. I'm going to go over everything you need to do to break through that plateau and start seeing improvements again.

Question #3: Which exercises are you stuck on?

This is yet another important question to ask because the most common response I get is:

"I've managed to increase my overhead press by 20 pounds in the last 2 months but I'm still doing lateral raises with a pair of 20s!"

Here is the deal:

Your progress is always going to be better on multi-joint exercises compared to isolation movements.

There are 2 main reasons why this is true:

- Performing big compound lifts in the heavy low-rep ranges is much easier and SAFER, provided your form is good. Going ham on the lat pulldown machine is stupid, ineffective and can hurt your shoulders.
- Your big compound lifts are at the beginning of your workout (or if they aren't – they should be) and you perform them while you're at your strongest.

A plateau is best diagnosed when there's no progress on a compound lift for 3 or more weeks. Don't worry if you can't make weekly progress on lateral dumbbell raises.

Isolation exercises are steadily going to follow the lead as long as your compound lifts improve over time. You're never going to see amazing progress on your chest flyes, but as long as your bench press goes up over time, your chest will grow.

Question #4: Could the problem be related to bad form or lack of mobility?

Improper form can stop you from getting stronger. This is especially true for compound exercises like the bench press, squat, deadlift, and overhead press.

You see, these movements are highly technical. Getting stronger requires proper execution and skill.

Setting yourself up for each set and leveraging your strengths can be the difference between making strength progress, injury-free and plateauing for months.

Aside from getting the proper form down, practicing the lifts often will allow you get better at them which will lead to faster progress.

But, performing the lifts with bad form will not only limit the potential benefit you can get from them but also increase the risk of injury.

And lastly, lack of mobility can significantly worsen your form and reduce the range of motion you can use.

If you have bad hip mobility, your squats and deadlifts are always going to suffer. They'll feel uncomfortable and unnatural and progress will be very slow.

If you have thoracic or shoulder mobility issues, your bench press and overhead press are going to be difficult to perform and progress on.

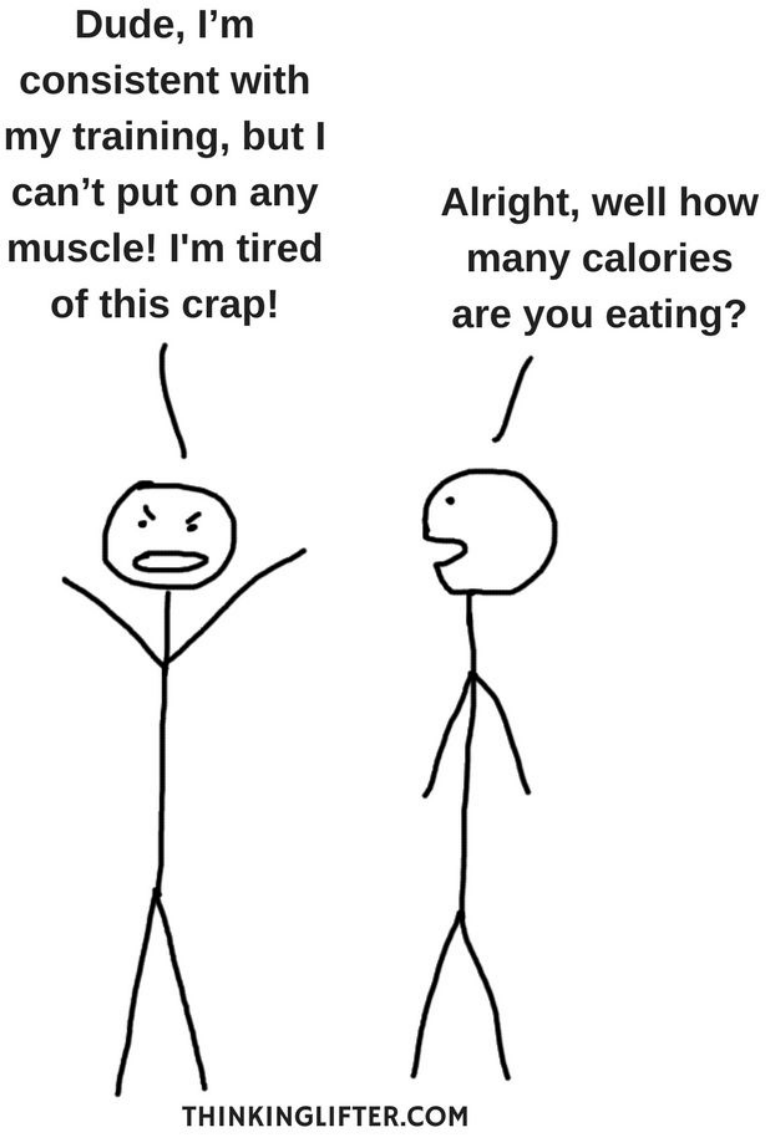
If you're having trouble progressing on one or two exercises, but everything else is going up, your problem is most likely hiding somewhere within the execution of that particular movement.

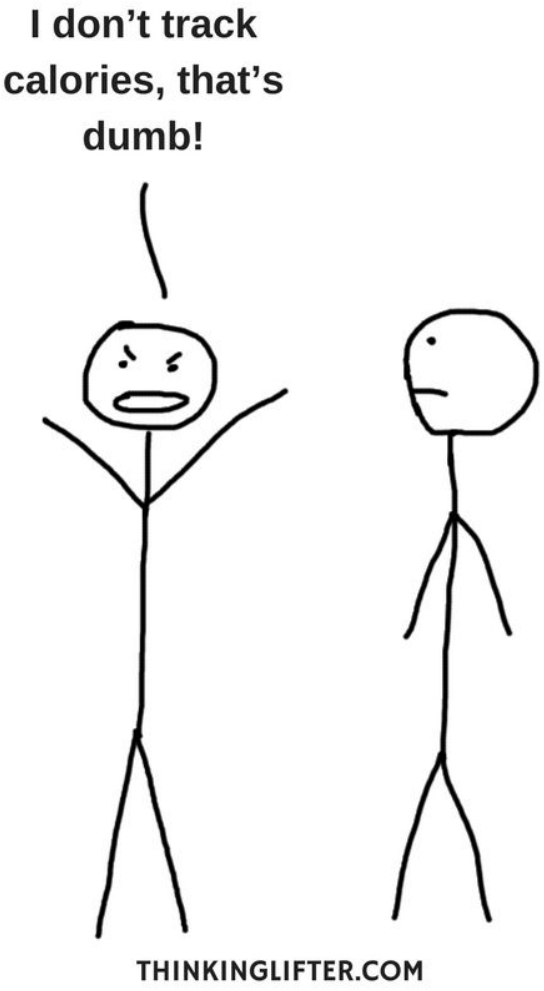
Because of that, you need to make sure that your form is on point. If you're having doubts, ask someone who is knowledgeable to review your form or film yourself and review it yourself.

Question #5: What do your training volume and frequency look like?

Let me start by saying that overtraining is quite real and it can kick your ass if you can't diagnose it early on.

A big reason why you might have hit a plateau is that you could be pushing it a bit too hard. Yes, doing more work can be less effective (to a point where it becomes counterproductive).




I don’t track calories, that’s dumb!
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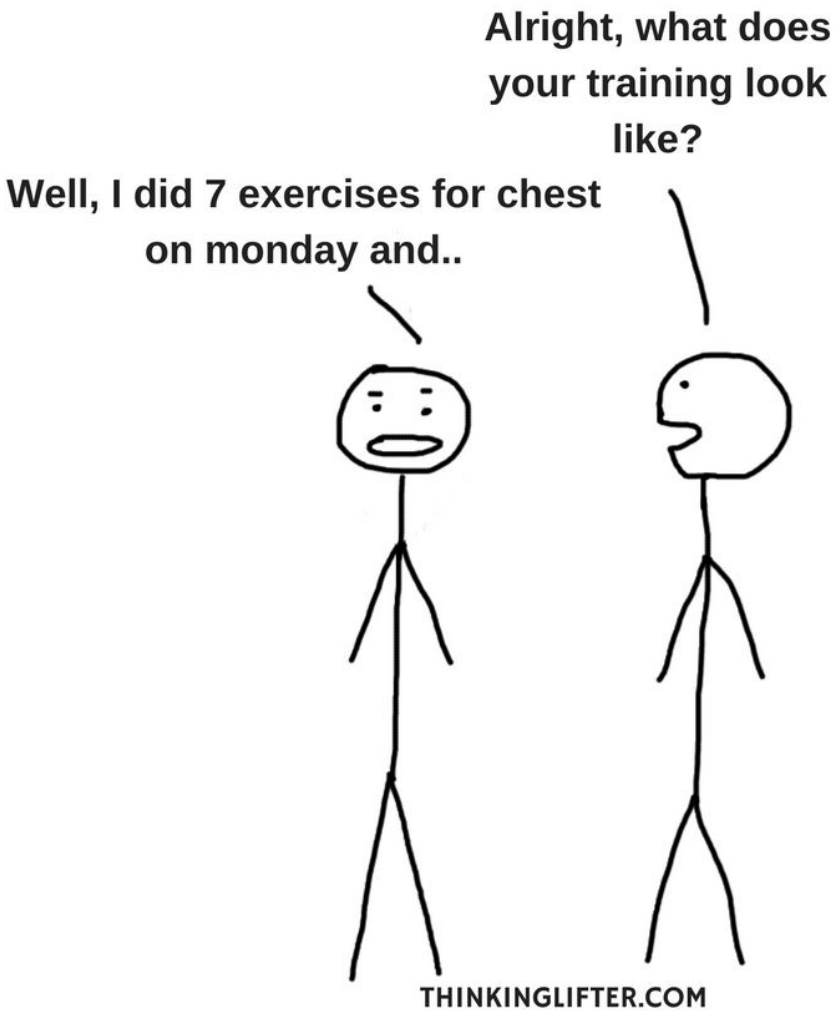
Alright, what does your training look like?
Well, I did 7 exercises for chest on monday and..
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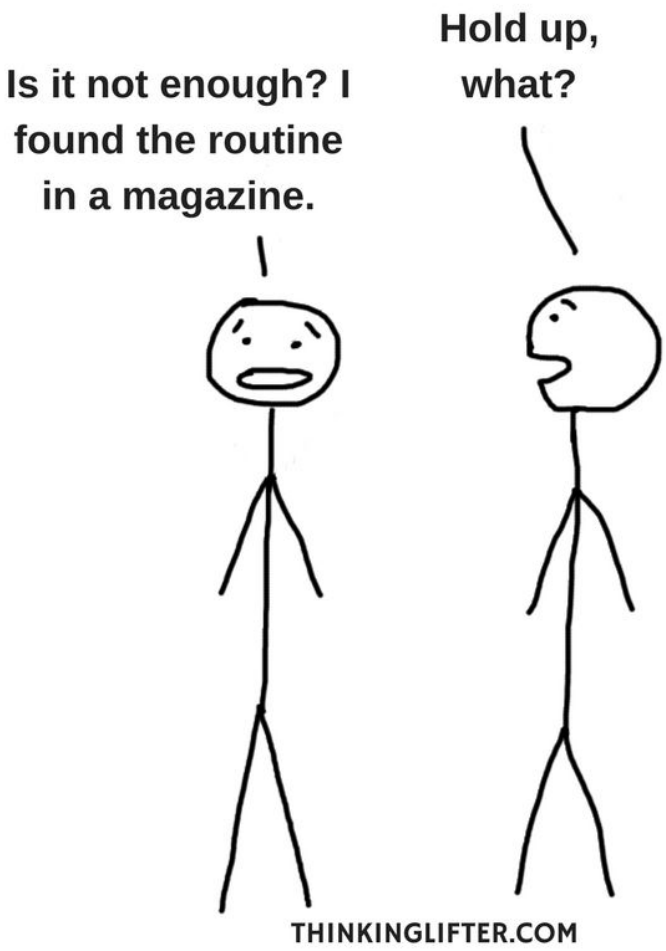

I've had guys walk up to me asking why they're not getting stronger despite putting in a lot of work. Some of them have told me that they do 20-30 working sets for muscles like chest and back per week!

As a beginner to intermediate level lifter, you don't need such high amounts of volume to grow. We'll get into more specifics on training below.

Question #6: Are you training for strength gains?

If everything is good so far, it's time to take a look at how you approach your training.

Here is why:

Diet and recovery play a huge role in your progress, but if those 2 aspects are in check and you cannot detect an issue there, it's time to take a closer look at how you train.

Simply put:

If you want to make good strength gains over time, you need to incorporate heavy compound lifting into your training sessions, period.

I used to train only in the 8-12 rep range (where 8 felt like a heavy set) for my first 2 years in the gym. Let me just say that I made so little progress despite my newbie gains that it was embarrassing.

My bench was 95 lbs when I first got started and I barely broke 135 by year two.

Why?

Because I wasn't focusing on progressive overload, I was exercising. Furthermore, it is much more difficult to build strength when you're only using lighter weights.

Question #7: Could cardio be interfering with your lifting progress?

Cardio is excellent for your health, longevity, and endurance. But it can also interfere with your strength and muscle gains. It does that mainly because of 3 reasons:

1. Cardio burns calories. Yes, a shocker, I know. But say you're doing 20 minutes of low-intensity cardio after each lifting session. That would burn an extra 150-200 calories. And if you don't make up for

those calories, you may not be in the caloric surplus that you need for optimal muscle gains and strength.

2. High impact cardio, such as running, causes damage to muscles, joints and soft tissue. When the damage becomes more than the body can handle and recover from, issues such as lifting plateaus come to the surface.
3. The SAID (Specific Adaptations to Imposed Demands) principle can also be the reasons why cardio could hold you back. Many studies have looked at concurrent training and how it affects the trainees' results in regards to aerobic and anaerobic adaptations.

   Without fail, most find that combining cardio and lifting delivers smaller anaerobic (strength, power, hypertrophy) adaptations when compared to strict lifting protocols.

   This meta-analysis from 2012 reviewed 21 studies and came to this conclusion:

   Our results indicate that interference effects of endurance training are a factor of the modality, frequency, and duration of the endurance training selected.

   Trying to improve more than one thing at a time is often a foolhardy goal and most people end up achieving none.

   If you want to get strong - lift more weights.

   If you want to improve your endurance - do more endurance work.

Still, context is important. Yes, cardio can interfere with your strength gains if you overdo it and can't recover from it. Running 16 miles/week while trying to bring up your squat strength isn't exactly the *smartest* thing you can do.

But, cardio can also improve your work capacity (the amount of work you can do and recover from), lung capacity, and many health markers.

I don't want you to come to the conclusion that I'm bashing cardio - far from it. Below, we'll look at specific ways you can add cardio to your training in a way that improves your long-term results.

How Diet Can Make or Break Your Progress and What to do, Step by Step

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A lot of times, not making any progress in the gym is due to not eating enough calories.

After the initial 'newbie gains' run their course, you need to start paying more attention to your diet to ensure that it is not holding you back.

For example, the first time I attempted to bulk, I wasn't tracking my macros or even calorie. I tried to eat a lot and I generally kept my meals filled with whole foods.

I wasn't making much progress partially because I was under-eating.

Despite my plate being full of foods, each meal was no more than 700-900 calories. I never ate more than 3000 calories, which put me under maintenance at the time (but I didn't know it).

I should have been eating at least 3400 calories a day to be in some kind of a caloric surplus and optimize muscle growth.

Once I started tracking my calories and macros, I started eating much more food and I never had to worry that my diet might be holding me back.

To make sure that your diet is never the issue, you need to do 2 things:

1. Track your calories and adjust as needed.

2. Track your macronutrients (or at the very least – protein).

First off, calculate your BMR using this formula:

English BMR Formula

Women: BMR = 655 + (4.35 x weight in pounds) + (4.7 x height in inches) - (4.7 x age in years)

Men: BMR = 66 + (6.23 x weight in pounds) + (12.7 x height in inches) - (6.8 x age in year)

Metric BMR Formula

Women: BMR = 655 + (9.6 x weight in kilos) + (1.8 x height in cm) - (4.7 x age in years)

Men: BMR = 66 + (13.7 x weight in kilos) + (5 x height in cm) - (6.8 x age in years)

Credits: http://www.bmi-calculator.net/bmr-calculator/bmr-formula.php

I've found it to be one of the more accurate methods out there. I don't recommend most online calculators because they underestimate your calorie needs.

Now that you've calculated your BMR, calculate your TDEE using this multiplier:

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) : Calorie-Calculation = BMR x 1.2
- If you are lightly active (light exercise/sports 1-3 days/week) : Calorie-Calculation = BMR x 1.375
- If you are moderatetely active (moderate exercise/sports 3-5 days/week) : Calorie-Calculation = BMR x 1.55
- If you are very active (hard exercise/sports 6-7 days a week) : Calorie-Calculation = BMR x 1.725
- If you are extra active (very hard exercise/sports & physical job or 2x training) : Calorie-Calculation = BMR x 1.9

Credits: http://www.bmi-calculator.net/bmr-calculator/harris-benedict-equation/

Now that you know how much energy your body needs, you're already ahead of a big chunk of regular gym goers.

From here, add a 200-300 calorie surplus to that number (to ensure that you're feeding your body with enough energy to build muscle).

Note: Keep in mind that as you build muscle, you will have to increase your calorie intake to maintain a surplus. I recommend re-calculating your TDEE for every 7-10 pounds of weight you gain over time.

You know your caloric needs, you've calculated the surplus, now it's time to split your calories between carbs, fats, and protein.

For those of you who don't know what "macros" are, they are the components that make up food. Also, read this.

Each macronutrient has a certain number of calories per gram. Protein and carbs have 4 calories and fats have 9 calories per gram.

Protein is First

Protein is of great importance for us lifters. It helps maintain muscle mass, as well as build more of it.

Protein is also very satiating. If you're the type of person who struggles with hunger, even when bulking, eating a bit more protein could help blunt your hunger.

As far as intake goes, 1 gram per pound of body weight is enough to maximize its effects. If you weigh 180 pounds, aim for 180 grams of protein. Simple.

Same for you ladies. If you weigh 125 pounds, eat 125 grams of protein daily.

Carbs and Fats are Second

Splitting up your remaining calories between carbs and fats should be based on your personal taste, but there are two rules to keep in mind:

Get between 0.3 and 0.6 grams of fats per pound of body weight. If you weigh 180 pounds, aim for 54 to 108 grams of fat/day (180*0.3=54, 180*0.6=108). At the very least, 15% of your calories should come from fats.

If you're eating around 3300 calories per day, 15% is 495 calories (3300 * 0.15 = 495), which is 55 grams of fat (405 / 9 = 55).

A lot of people (read: zealots) like to pick on dietary fat and demonize it, because..

Reasons, I guess?

But the fact is, dietary fat is an integral part of any balanced diet. Fats support metabolic function, cell signaling, immune system function, hormone production, and the absorption of important nutrients (such as vitamin D and A).

Fats also add texture and taste to meals and take longer for the body to break down and absorb, which makes you feel full for longer.

There is much to be said about dietary fat, but it's beyond the scope of this guide. If you're interested, read: All About Healthy Fats

Finally, on to carbohydrates. Once you have your protein and fats numbers, calculating carb needs is pretty straight-forward:

Leave the rest of your calories for carbs.

Let me give you an example (**warning: basic math ahead**):

You're eating 3400 calories per day and weigh 180 pounds.

You'll need 180 grams of protein (180 * 4 = 720 calories) and 54 to 108 grams of fats (54 * 9 = 486 calories, 108 * 9 = 972 calories).

The remaining calories go to carbs. In our case:

3400 - 720 (protein calories) = 2680;

2680 - 486 (fat calories) = 2194 calories;

Now, split 2194 by 4 (number of calories per gram of carbs).

2194 / 4 = 548 grams of carbs;

Or, if you go with the high end of fats intake (0.6g/lb), the example would look like this:

3400 - 720 = 2680;

2680 - 972 = 1708;

1708 / 4 = 427 grams of carbs per day;

The higher your fat intake, the lower your carbs need to be and vice-versa. Don't stress too much about it. Get enough protein, eat within your range of fats and get the remaining from carbs.

Also, aim for 10-15 grams of fiber for every 1000 calories you eat.

Fiber provides many health benefits and keeps you regular. Fiber also fills you up, which is a nice bonus, especially if you are one who struggles with hunger.

Foods that are high in fiber are generally high in volume and low in calories. If you're interested in learning more about fiber, read this.

We went over a ton of information, so let's recap how to set up your diet:

Here's an average guy who's looking to build some muscle. Let's call him Bob.

- Bob is 6'2" (188cm) and weighs 180 lb (~81kg.).
- He is 27 years old and is moderately active.
- He spent some time losing fat.
- Now he wants to build more muscle mass.

Step #1: Calculate Bob's maintenance calories, or TDEE

Calories come first. Using the formula from above and using Bob's stats, we can get to his TDEE:

For Bob, we'll use his height and weight in cm and kg respectively.

BMR = 66 + (13.7 * **weight in kilos**) + (5 * **height in cm**) - (6.8 * **age in years**)

66 + (13.7 * **81**) + (5 * **188**) - (6.8 * **27**) = 1932 calories

Now that we know Bob's BMR, we'll multiply it by 1.55 (Moderately active - moderate sports/exercise 3 to 5 times per week). This number best describes his activity level.

1932 * 1.55 = 2995 calories for maintenance.

We'll add a 200 calorie surplus to this number and our starting calories for muscle growth will be 3195.

Step #2: Calculate Bob's protein needs

This one is pretty simple. We are using the 1g per lb of body weight rule. So 180 lb = 180 grams of protein per day.

Step #3: Calculate fats, carbs, and fiber

We'll first set the fats number and leave the rest for carbs. So adhering to the 0.3 to 0.6 grams of fat per lb of body weight rule, we end up with:

180 * 0.3 = 54

180 * 0.6 = 108

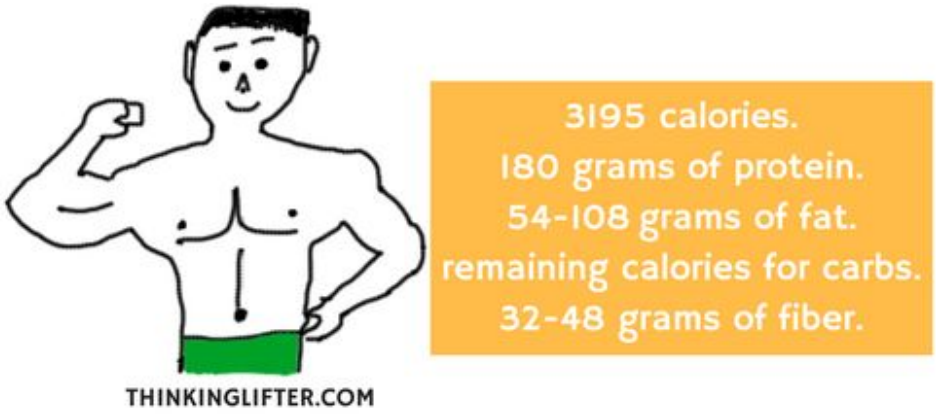
Bob is going to be eating somewhere between 54 and 108 grams of fats per day and get the remaining calories from carbs.

He is also going to eat 10-15 grams of fiber for every 1000 calories. In other words:

10 * 3.2 = 32 grams of fiber

15 * 3.2 = 48 grams of fiber

Final result:



And if you aren't interested in tracking all of your macros but just protein, follow this rule:

Eat between 0.8 and 1.2 grams of protein per pound of body weight.

Once you know your calorie and macronutrient goals, track your bodyweight to gauge progress.

Track your body weight daily, in the morning and take the weekly average. Here's an example of how it might look like:

Week 1

Monday	187.3lbs./84.9kg
Tuesday	186.4lbs./84.5kg
Wednesday	186.5lbs./84.5kg
Thursday	188lbs./85.2kg

Friday	186.6lbs./84.6kg
Saturday	187lbs./84.8kg
Sunday	187.1lbs./84.8kg
Weekly Average	**186.9lbs./84.7kg**

Week 2

Monday	187.6lbs./85kg
Tuesday	186.4lbs./84.5kg
Wednesday	186.6lbs./84.6kg
Thursday	188lbs./85.2kg
Friday	187.1lbs./84.8kg
Saturday	187.5lbs./85kg
Sunday	187lbs./84.8kg
Weekly Average	**187.1lbs./84.8kg**

Week 3

Monday	188lbs./85.2kg
Tuesday	186.6lbs./84.6kg

Wednesday	186lbs./84.3kg
Thursday	188.3lbs./85.4kg
Friday	187.5lbs./85kg
Saturday	188lbs./85.2kg
Sunday	187.3lbs./84.9kg
Weekly Average	**187.3lbs./84.9kg**

As you can see, there is a steady weight gain each week. Granted, this is the ideal scenario, but most people do experience fluctuations in weight due to bloating and other things.

Even if you wake up a couple of pounds heavier one day, you shouldn't take it as definitive proof that you've overeaten too much. As long as your weekly averages are consistent, you're on the right track.

If you see your weight plateau for more than 3 weeks, you can bump your calories by 100-150/day. This should get things moving again.

How to Train for Steady and Consistent Strength Gain Over Time

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To ensure that you're training for consistent strength and muscle improvements over time, there are a few things you need to focus your attention on:

I)Train each lift 2-3 times per week.

If you'll recall from earlier in this guide, we discussed that getting stronger on a certain movement is a skill that, like any other, needs to be practiced. You see, many people only train the major lifts once a week and practice the execution just 4 times per month.

And while this approach can deliver decent results as long as the training volume is there, it is not optimal for getting stronger.

This is why training the lifts you want to improve more often, provided you're recovering, will lead to faster strength gains.

Part of that can be attributed to the improved neuromuscular efficiency with the lift. Also, any extra hypertrophy you get from a higher frequency can also contribute to strength.

Remember: a bigger muscle has more potential for strength. You may not necessarily gain a lot of strength if you gain 5 pounds of muscle, but your long-term potential will be much greater.

Also, there is a confidence boost that comes with the increased frequency and a small part of the strength gains could be thanks to that.

This, of course, is a thought and something that I've noticed about myself and people that I've coached.

And finally, training a lift (and muscle group) more than once per week allows for better volume allocation. Instead of cramming as much as you can within a single workout, higher frequency allows for more flexibility and somewhat easier training sessions.

Think of it this way:

Say you’re doing 16 working sets for the chest per week. If you do them in a single workout, the accumulated fatigue will make you progressively weaker throughout the course of the workout.

But, if you were to split these 16 sets into 2 or 3 workouts, you can manage your fatigue much better and always train your chest fresh. This would allow for more training volume to accumulate.

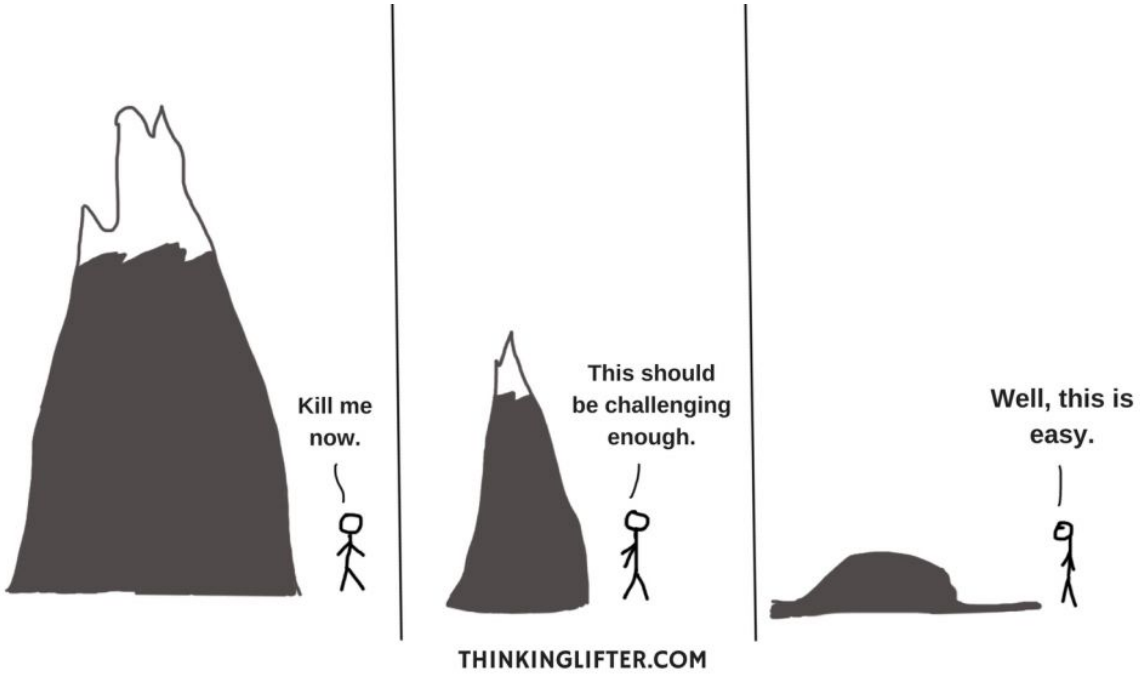
II) Do enough work (optimize your training volume).

The term “training volume” refers to the amount of work you do each workout or within a given week. There are many ways to track it, but for the context of this guide, we’ll talk about the number of sets.

Training volume is a key driver for strength adaptations and muscle growth. More volume brings more results, to a point. Finding the “Goldilocks zone” is important for optimal progress.

Do too little and progress is slow, or non-existent.

Do too much and you run the risk of overtraining or injuring yourself.



So, what is the right amount?

The general consensus is that you need 8+ sets per muscle group/week for strength gains and 10+ sets for muscle growth.

Now, my opinion is that these estimations are very conservative for most people. Obviously, factors such as genetics, training age, current goals, ability to train, stress outside of the gym, and diet all play a role in how well you can respond to training.

But, I consider 8 sets per week to be the bare minimum for progress in the gym. If you're looking for optimal results, building more volume will bring better results.

But how much volume you need is going to be individual. Some people make great progress with 10 sets per week, where others need upward of 16 to see good progress.

This is going to involve some trial and error to find the sweet spot. But you'll still make decent progress as long as you're building up enough volume every week.

III) Dial down the cardio or do it on separate days if you can.

Don't get me wrong. Doing regular cardio provides numerous benefits and you should do at least 20-30 minutes a week, whether you're trying to build muscle or lose fat.

But there are two major ways in which cardio can slow down or even stop your progress:

- Doing cardio burns calories (up to several hundred per session) and can reduce your caloric surplus without you even realizing it.
- Like any other form of physical activity, cardio can too, lead to symptoms of overtraining if you go overboard with it. This is specifically tied to the interference effect.

The first issue is pretty easy to deal with. Especially when you consider that low-intensity steady state cardio can increase appetite for some people. But, you still need to be mindful and eat an extra 50-150 calories a day depending on how much cardio you do every week.

The second issue is directly linked to the intensity and frequency of your cardio sessions. As I mentioned earlier, doing 20-30 minutes of cardio a week is recommended and it can be quite beneficial.

But doing too much will inevitably cause muscular and CNS fatigue that will have a negative impact on your workouts.

Another important thing to keep in mind is the type of cardio. Most of the data out there suggest that running negatively impacts strength and size, where cycling doesn't.

IV)Take deload or recovery weeks regularly.

I've written a very long and detailed guide on deload and recovery weeks. You can check it out here. But, let me give you the cliff-notes:

- Lifting puts a lot of stress on your body. As such, you need time off the intense training every 6-10 weeks.
- There are two primary ways to do that: 1) take a recovery week and don't lift during that period, or 2) take a deload week where you reduce the intensity (weight lifted), number of sets, or both by 50%.
- Even if you do everything right, there will come a moment where you start feeling weaker, de-motivated, lethargic, and achy. These are all symptoms of overtraining and you need to look out for them.
- De-loading or taking a complete week off lifting every once in a while is mandatory for ongoing progress in the gym.
- Schedule a de-load/complete week off lifting every 6-10 weeks and see how it works for you.
- If you feel the need to de-load more often, do it. This is often the case during fat loss periods when calories are limited.
- Strength adaptations and muscle mass are resistant to at least 2 weeks of de-training. There is no need to fear that you'll lose your gains if you don't train at all for a week or so.
- A final thing: I recommend scheduling such a week ahead of time instead of waiting for overtraining to set in before taking a break. It's much better that way because you'll feel better and recover more quickly. When you take a deload once you start feeling overtrained, a single week might not do the trick.

V)Don't train to failure, leave repetitions in the tank.

Pushing yourself to the limit on a given set does have its benefits. You are doing the most work your body is capable of and you're taking as much from the set as you can.

You're recruiting the most muscle fibers and causing the most damage to the muscles.

But, where you could be failing is to understand how taking one set to failure could impact the rest of the exercise and workout.

Let's take a look at an example of training to failure vs. training close to failure and see where we end up:

Example #1: Training to failure on all sets on the barbell back squat

Set 1: 255 pounds for 10 reps

Set 2: 255 pounds for 7 reps

Set 3: 255 pounds for 5 reps

Set 4: 255 pounds for 2-3 reps

Total reps done: **24-25**

Example #2: Training close to failure on all sets for the squat

Set 1: 255 pounds for 8 reps

Set 2: 255 pounds for 8 reps

Set 3: 255 pounds for 8 reps

Set 4: 255 pounds for 6-8 reps (possibly hit failure before 8)

Total reps done: **30-32**

See the difference there?

Even though the first dude went all out and took the old saying “Squat ‘till you drop!” seriously, he was behind the second guy who managed his fatigue much better.

The second guy could fail to get 8 on his last set due to the accumulated fatigue. But, he would still get more repetitions in without having to bust himself up in the process.

The accumulated volume the second guy has is more. If he can manage his fatigue throughout the entire workout, he will build up more training volume. And that, over the weeks and months can and will result in much greater strength and muscle gains.

An example where training to failure can help you:

Say you’re doing a set of seated dumbbell shoulder press and you get 8 reps on the first 3 sets, stopping close to failure. Now, on the 4th set, you can push it to failure and increase your training volume.

Depending on how long you rest, you might be able to get as much as 9 or 10 repetitions.

In this example, you would be:

- Managing your fatigue better throughout the exercise.

- Getting the benefit of training to failure.

VI)Include a few main lifts into your training to track progress better.

As we already discussed above, you can't expect to make the same progress on each exercise. For example, gauging your progress on the deadlift is going to be much easier than doing so on an isolation movement like a dumbbell curl.

The deadlift recruits the whole body and many muscle groups, where the bicep curl only works a single, small muscle group.

Because of that, you can expect to make much more noticeable load progress on a compound lift than on an isolation one.

For that reason, you should include a few main lifts into your training that you can gauge progress on. Here are some examples:

Back: conventional, rack-pull & sumo deadlift, barbell row, pull-up/chin-up;

Chest: flat & incline bench press, chest dips;

Legs: back & front squat, hack squat, leg press, Romanian deadlift;

Shoulders: overhead press

Bicep: chin-ups and weighted chin-ups (either track the extra weight you use or the number of reps).

Triceps: close-grip bench press, tricep dips;

Abs/Calves/Biceps/Triceps: Aside from the 3 movements for biceps and triceps, I can't recommend any exercise for these muscles. Instead, focus on

other methods of progress, such as doing more repetitions with the same weight. If you'll recall from earlier in the guide, I listed 8 ways you can progress, none of which include adding more weight to the bar.

VII)Train the main lifts at a higher intensity.

In this very recent meta-analysis, 21 studies that met the following criteria were included:

- an experimental trial involving both low-load training [≤60% 1 repetition maximum (1RM)] and high-load training (>60% 1RM)
- with all sets in the training protocols being performed to momentary muscular failure
- at least one method of estimating changes in muscle mass or dynamic, isometric, or isokinetic strength was used
- the training protocol lasted for a minimum of 6 weeks
- the study involved participants with no known medical conditions or injuries impairing training capacity

Across the board, they concluded that gains in 1RM strength were significantly greater in favor of high-load training vs. low-load training.

Changes in hypertrophy were similar between the two conditions. This further proves that training volume is the main driver of hypertrophy. As long as volume is accounted for, muscle growth can occur within all repetition ranges.

What does this mean for you?

For one, make sure that you're working with heavier loads (at least 60% of 1RM) on movements you're trying to get strong on.

70-85% of 1RM is ideal.

Second, you can rest assured that you don’t need to ego-lift heavy dumbbells on lateral raises if you want shoulder growth. A pair that allows you 12-15 repetitions with good form will likely make your shoulders grow the same, if not better.

Follow These Rules to Ensure That Your Recovery is Not The Cause of Your Plateau

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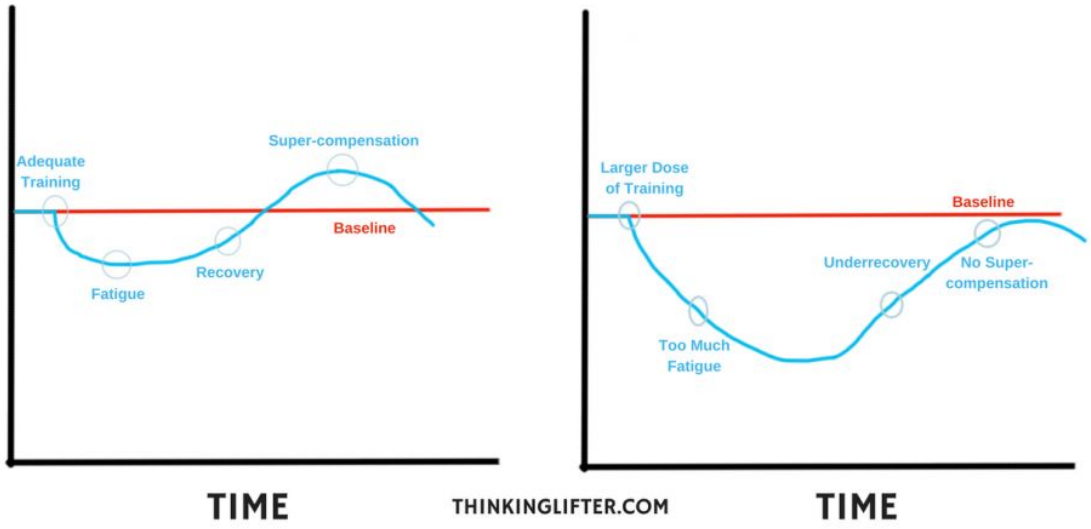
Apart from diet and training, recovery is another important factor for getting stronger.

If you're not recovering well, you'll accumulate a lot of stress and eventually hit a brick wall.



Below, I’ve outlined the 3 steps you need to follow to ensure that your recovery is adequate.

1.Sleep enough every night.

Sleep deprivation is responsible for some health issues. This study, in particular, took ten healthy young guys at the average age of 24 and cut their sleep from 8 hr 55 min to 4 hr 48 min for a week. What they found was interesting:

Their total free testosterone levels decreased by 10 to 15 %.

Other problems people face because of poor sleep are:

- tiredness;
- low libido;
- depression;
- lethargy;
- lack of focus;
- reduced metabolic rate;
- no motivation to train;

A good night's rest has been proven to improve reaction times, accuracy, athletic performance and energy levels.

And although sleep deprivation hasn't been shown to directly affect muscle strength, time to exhaustion is decreased.

This means that subjects weren't able to exercise as long as usual before feeling exhausted.

So how much sleep should you get? A general guideline is to get between 7 and 9 hours of sleep every night. Here are some tips for better sleep:

- Turn off electronics and screens within one hour of going to bed. Read a book, take a shower, or plan the day ahead.

- Maintain a consistent schedule for going to bed and waking up. Over time, your body adapts and falling asleep/waking up get easier.
- Keep your room cool, around 65-70 degrees. Also, make sure your room is completely dark.
- Cut off caffeine drinks within 8-10 hours of going to bed.
- Supplement with 3-5 mg of a melatonin before bedtime for improved sleep.

2.Manage your stress

When we talk about training and making gains, we often overlook one very important factor that plays a huge role in it: stress.

We focus on our training and nutrition, make tweaks here and there, and think that as long as we are consistent, we'll get the desired results.

But, the human body is much more complicated and we cannot always expect the same outcome from our actions.

Even if we follow through with everything, sometimes we don't get the best results. And a big reason for that is stress.

In this study, the researchers set out to compare two groups of people and how well they respond and adapt to training:

- People with high life stress;
- People with low stress.

They found that the stressed out group gained less strength on the bench press and squat compared to their stress-free counterparts.

It's worth noting, however, that the volume of stress may not be the only important thing, but how we react to it also matters. For example, I think that

stress is much more detrimental to people who have very little stress but who get worked up over every little thing.

And then there are those people who have more stress in their lives but manage to remain calm and collected.

So, my recommendation is to not only try and reduce the stress in your life but also to become more mindful of how you react to it.

To some of you, this might sound silly, but I've found that meditation has helped me deal with stress much better. I've been practicing it for a few years now and I'm a much calmer and more collected person thanks to it.

At the very least, it's worth trying for 30-60 days of as little as 5 minutes per day, and see how it affects you.

3.Structure your program in a smart way to allow proper recovery.

Following the guidelines of:

1. Train each muscle 2-3 times per week;
2. Train each muscle with 10+ sets per week;

We can put together a split.

Some guys like to train the entire upper body within two days: a push (chest, delts, triceps) and a pull (back and biceps).

But, if you're like me and you prefer to hit them separately, make sure there is one day in-between each session that allows for proper muscle recovery.

The reason why this is important is that your chest, triceps, and delts assist one another during compound exercises like the bench press, overhead press, and close-grip bench press.

The same goes for back exercises. You cannot isolate your back with bent over barbell rows because your biceps get worked too. The same way you cannot isolate your chest with the bench press, because your shoulders and triceps play a big role in that lift, as well.

Same goes for the overhead press, dips, and close-grip bench press.

Even though some are going to come in as assisting muscles for the movement, they still get worked and need enough rest before you train them again.

Here are a few sample splits you can use:

Upper-Lower Body Split Example (4 Workouts)

Monday	Upper Body
Tuesday	Lower Body
Wednesday	Off
Thursday	Upper Body
Friday	Lower Body
Saturday	Off
Sunday	Off

Split spanning across 2 weeks (9 Workouts)

Week 1

Monday	Chest, Shoulders & Triceps
Tuesday	Back & Biceps
Wednesday	Off
Thursday	Legs & Abs
Friday	Off
Saturday	Chest, Shoulders & Triceps
Sunday	Back & Biceps

Week 2

Monday	Off
Tuesday	Legs & Abs
Wednesday	Off
Thursday	Chest, Shoulders & Triceps
Friday	Back & Biceps
Saturday	Off

Sunday	Legs & Abs

Modified Bro-Split (4 or 5 Workouts)

Monday	Back (+back/front squat)
Tuesday	Chest (+ lower load overhead press)
Wednesday	Off
Thursday	Legs (+ sumo/conventional deadlift)
Friday	Shoulders (+ lower load bench press)
Saturday	Arms (optional volume day)
Sunday	Off