

## **Pull-Up Progression:**

**MASTER THE PULL-UP, EVEN IF  
YOU CAN'T DO ONE REP**

by

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“This PDF bonus is split into two parts:

In the following section, we'll review a progression scheme if you can't do a single pull-up or you can't do more than five in one go. In the section after that, we'll tackle pull-up progression if you can do more than five reps in one set.

## Pull Up Progression (Even If You Can't Do a Single Repetition)

This is what I like to call the initial pull-up progression scheme, and it's intended for complete beginners. So, if you can't do a single repetition (or you can't do more than five repetitions in one go), read on. If you can do over five reps in a single set, skip to the next point for your plan of action.

### 1. Slow Eccentrics (Negatives)

The eccentric contraction is a powerful tool we can use to build strength and muscle, yet so many folks out there don't think twice about it.

Negatives are particularly beneficial for building enough strength to do a pull-up because you can take advantage of the fact that, no matter how weak you may feel, you can almost certainly lower yourself for at least 2-4 seconds. If you can do that, then you can improve upon it.

The goal is to get yourself to the top position of the pull-up – be it by stepping on something like a chair or a box, or by jumping up – and then fighting gravity as hard as you can. You can do these in a couple of ways:

- A single, slow eccentric before taking a break for one or two minutes. The goal is to give it your all and call it a set.
- Multiple eccentrics of two to ten seconds each. The goal is a controlled descent, but avoid exerting yourself too much on any given repetition.

And, of course, no matter which route you go, remember that progressive overload is imperative here. So what if you can't lower yourself for longer than 5-7 seconds today? A couple of days from now, you'll add a few seconds. A few days later, another few seconds. Before you know it, you'll be able to lower yourself for a solid 30-40 seconds.

I could finally do my first pull up around the time I started holding a negative for about 45-50 seconds.

## 2. Band-Assisted Pull-Ups

The goal with band-assisted pull-ups is to take away some of the resistance – some of your body weight – and allow you to perform multiple repetitions in a row. Since different bands offer different levels of resistance, you can gradually progress from the most to least resistant as you get stronger.

The only issue is, most gyms don't have a wide selection of resistance bands, and you may have to buy them yourself. The good news is, you can get a decent set for \$30-50 and use them for decades, and not just for learning the pull-up.

You can also use a single band and get different levels of resistance from it, depending on how you loop it. For example, you can start by looping both of your feet – this offers the greatest stretch on the band and thus the most help. Over time, you can eventually begin looping just one foot, then both knees, then one knee. That's four levels of resistance from a single band.

As a rule of thumb, the more stretched out the band is, the more potential energy it has stored, and the more help you'll receive from the bottom up.

[Here's a demonstrational video on how you can do these.](#)

## 3. Active Dead Hangs



Passive → Active

Similarly to how slow negatives build strength and movement proficiency, active dead hangs teach you how to engage your back correctly, keep your shoulders in a safe position, and maintain tightness throughout the set.

To perform these, all you have to do is grab the bar much as you would for the pull-up, but rather than pull yourself up, hang. As you're hanging, bring your chest out as much as you can while you simultaneously extend your scapulae back and down. Hold the arched position for a moment and loosen up a bit, allowing your traps to sag ever so slightly.

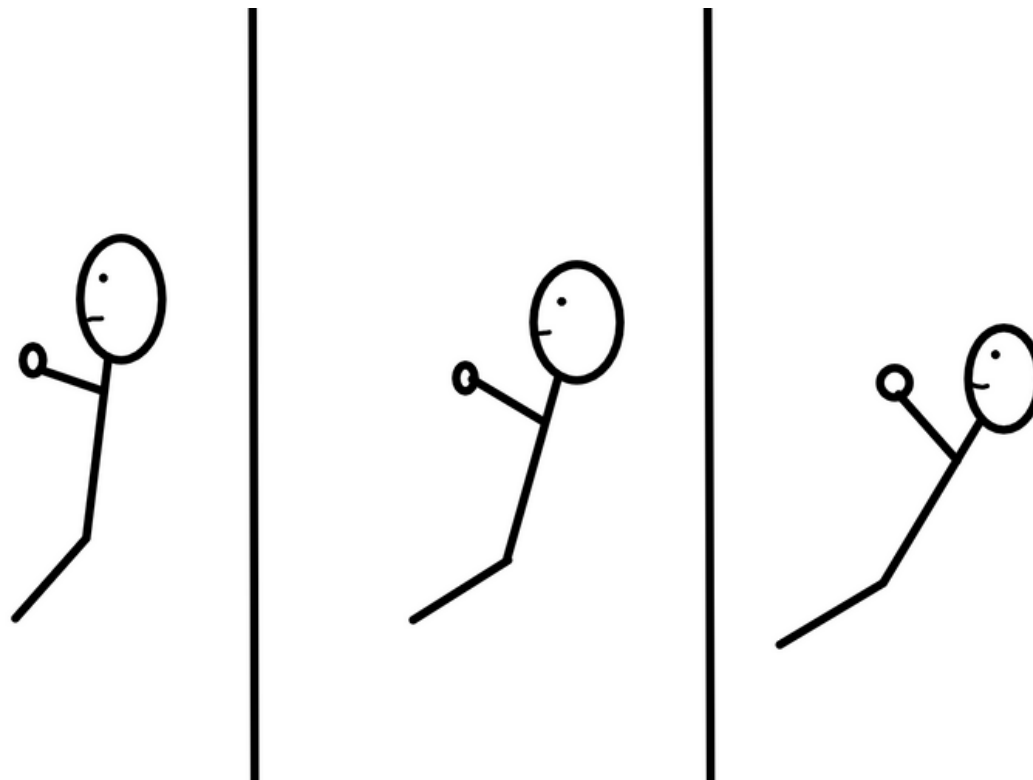
From there, repeat the movement pattern. You can start with multiple sets of three or four reps, making sure to bring your chest out as much as you can before relaxing. Over time, you can work up to sets of eight to ten repetitions each.

#### 4. Inverted Rows

Bodyweight rows are an incredible tool you can use to work your way up to your first pull-up, as they closely mimic the movement pattern and involve the same muscles. The difference is, you're pulling your body at a different angle, and your feet are in contact with the floor. Depending on the bar height, it takes away some or a lot of the resistance.

A great place to do these is on the smith machine because you can easily adjust the bar height to accommodate your strength level. As a rule of thumb, you should start by setting the bar at roughly chest level. Plant your heels firmly and begin rowing. Aim for three or four sets of eight to ten reps.

As you get stronger, gradually lower the bar, so your body slowly becomes more and more horizontal.



## 5. Some Fat Loss

This is a no-brainer, but many of us rarely think about it. It's much easier to work your way up to your first pull-up if there is less weight to pull.

So, if you've got some extra fat on your body, losing some of it is going to make the whole process much more straightforward. For example, if you lose 10 pounds of fat and maintain the muscle you have, you'll find it much easier to do your first pull-up and then work up to 5, 10, and more.

If you're interested, you can check out my guides on [strength training](#) and [how to set up your nutrition](#) for fat loss.

So, these are the five tactics you can use to learn the pull-up. I used them years ago, and I've had clients and friends do them since then. On their own, each tactic works well. But, together, they make the process much quicker.

## The First Pull-Up: Your Action Plan

The more focus you put on these tactics, and the earlier you add them to your workouts, the quicker the progress will be.

Begin by adding 3-4 sets of inverted rows (with the bar adjusted so you can do 8 to 10 repetitions) to one of your workouts – for example, after your primary movements on chest/push day.

Next, add 3-4 sets of band-assisted pull-ups (or chin-ups) and adjust the resistance so you can do at least five repetitions on each set. If you plan on doing those on back/pull day, do them as a first or second exercise while you're still fresh.

Also, add 2-4 sets of slow negatives to one of your workouts. For example, do your primary moves on leg day (squats, leg press, lunges, etc.) and then do a few sets of slow negatives. You can also do these during a rest day if you have easy access to a pull-up bar.

Finally, add a few sets of active dead hangs in another one of your workouts. Begin by focusing on proper thoracic extension and lat engagement before every worrying about repetition numbers.

The more of these tactics you plan on implementing, the more you should be mindful of your pulling volume. I recommend cutting back on your rowing and deadlifting to a degree, so you don't end up over-fatiguing your back muscles.

Here's an example of how you might integrate these tactics on a typical 4-day upper-lower split:

**Monday:** Upper Body + 3-4 sets of inverted rows (early on, as a first or second pulling exercise)

**Tuesday:** Lower Body + 2-4 sets of slow negatives (after your primary leg exercises)

**Wednesday:** Off

**Thursday:** Upper Body + 3-4 sets of band-assisted pull-ups (again, as a first or second pulling exercise)

**Friday:** Lower Body + 2-4 sets of active dead hangs (after the bulk of your lower body work)

**Saturday & Sunday:** Off

Alternatively, you can do three of the tactics on rest days (assuming you're training four days a week) to avoid doing too much volume in your workouts or if you're pressed for time. I also recommend focusing on a single tactic per day to manage fatigue and keep the quality of repetitions high.

The high frequency and moderate volume are going to help you build up the back strength and movement proficiency to perform the pull-up faster. And if you're somewhat (or very) overweight, losing some of the excess fluff is going to speed up the process.

With enough consistency, you should be able to do a solid set of three reps within a month. After that, keep repeating until you can do five repetitions in one go.

## Pull Up Progression If You Can Do More Than 5 Repetitions

This progression scheme is for those folks who can do more than five reps in one go. You can use these techniques to work your way up to 10, 20, and even more pull-ups in a single set.

There are a few ways you can go about adding more pull-up reps at this point – some are simpler; others are a bit more complex. For the sake of keeping things actionable and straightforward, I'll recommend three tactics. And nothing is to say that you can't use them at the same time.

### 1. Grease the Groove

Once you've built a solid base for your pull-up performance (being able to do between 5 and 15 reps in one go), it's a good idea to focus on increasing your neuromuscular efficiency. One great (and a bit unconventional) tactic to do that is called greasing the groove. With it, the goal is to focus on frequency and volume instead of intensity and effort.

There are many ways to implement this tactic into your training, and no matter which route you go with, remember to keep effort levels low to moderate and instead focus on doing lots of quality repetitions. This means that you don't take any sets to failure (or even close) and that you rest plenty between sets. This really shouldn't feel like your typical style of working out.

That way, you can keep fatigue low, do more total repetitions each week, and build up your prime movers for the particular exercise.

Here are two simple ways to implement this:

**a) Do 3-5 sets per day with a frequency of 4-5 times per week.**

Always leave at least two repetitions in the tank. For example:

**Monday:** 4 sets with at least 2 minutes rest in-between (2 reps in the tank)

**Tuesday:** 5 sets with at least 2 minutes rest in-between (3 reps in the tank)

**Wednesday:** Off

**Thursday:** 4 sets with at least 2 minutes rest in-between (2 reps in the tank)

**Friday:** Off

**Saturday:** 5 sets with at least 2 minutes rest in-between (3 reps in the tank)

**Sunday:** Off

**b) An autoregulated progression scheme that focuses on a daily repetition goal.**

This is by far the simplest and most pleasurable way to go about greasing the groove because it offers a lot of flexibility, and you can go by feel. On days where you feel better, you can do more reps per set. On days where you feel crappy, downregulate, so you maintain a consistent rate of exertion.

For example:

**Monday:** Repetition goal - 30 total

**Tuesday:** Off

**Wednesday:** Repetition goal - 20 total

**Thursday:** Off

**Friday:** Repetition goal - 30 total

**Saturday & Sunday:** Off

Once you've established your goals for each workout, do your total repetitions at a pace that allows you to maintain an RPE of no more than 7 or 8. For example, if your goal is 30 total repetitions and you're feeling particularly energetic, you can go ahead and do five sets of 6 reps. But if you're not feeling particularly good, you can do them like this:

Set 1: 6

Set 2: 6

Set 3: 5

Set 4: 5

Set 5: 4

Set 6: 4

Or like this:

Set 1: 5

Set 2: 5

Set 3: 5

Set 4: 4

Set 5: 4

Set 6: 4

Set 7: 3

It's also important to note that you should start with a conservative target and slowly add repetitions to your goal every week. If you can't do more than five reps in one go, it wouldn't be a good idea to set a daily goal of 50 repetitions.

And, of course, it's important to slowly progress your repetition numbers while keeping the level of effort on each set more or less consistent. For example, in the first sample, say that you manage to do a total of 62 repetitions for that week. On week 2, you should ideally be able to add 2-3 reps to your total without exerting more effort into the individual sets.

In our second example, you can simply go ahead by adding one repetition for each day's goal. Three sessions mean three extra reps.

## **2. Weighted Slow Eccentrics (Negatives)**

Similarly to how negatives can help you do your first pull-up, adding weighted negatives to your program can further improve your pull up progression once you've built a solid base. This is because you can typically overload the eccentric portion of a lift much more than you can the concentric. You can squat down much more weight than you can squat up. You can lower a much heavier barbell than you can row up. The same goes for the pull-up, and this is where weighted eccentrics can help you build more strength or overcome a plateau.

Your best tool here is a plain old weight belt that you put around your waist and can attach plates on.

I recommend starting conservatively by attaching a 10 or 15-pound plate (5-7.5 kilos), so you can get used to the movement and do negatives of at least 5-10 seconds each. If it feels too easy, you can always jump to a 25, 35, or even 45-pound plate.

The goal, as usual, is to do enough volume (which, in this case, would be to rack more seconds on the lowering portion). Much like bodyweight negatives, you can do these in the same two ways:

- A single extended eccentric (at least 20 seconds) before taking a couple of minutes to rest.
- Multiple shorter eccentrics (each being at least 4-5 seconds long) where each repetition isn't as demanding.



You can then progress these over the weeks in a couple of ways: doing longer eccentrics and/or adding more weight. For example, you can set a goal of doing four 30-second negatives with a given weight (say, 25 pounds). Once you do that, add 5 pounds and start over.

### 3. Weighted Pull-Ups

As you get stronger, weighted pull-ups become not only quite useful but also mandatory for you to keep making progress. With that said, I do recommend that you only do bodyweight pull-ups until you work your way up to 12 repetitions in a set.

Now, there are many progression schemes you can use for the weighted pull-up (and, really, any exercise). But I've found that more straightforward approaches tend to work better for most folks. I've used the below progression scheme on myself and clients, and have found it to work quite well. It's by no means fancy, but it gets the job done. Here are some notes:

- **This progression scheme has you work the pull-up in the 6 to 10 repetition range.**

I've found that going lower than that tends to impact technique too much and can often get to the point of ego lifting. You can eventually drop down to the 4-6 rep range, but I'd start with 6-10.

- **You'll be training the pull-up twice per week.**

You can add a third day if you feel like two aren't enough, but there will be plenty of volume to keep you progressing at a steady pace.

- **We'll be using a linear model of progression.**

It's simple, it's easy to comprehend, it's crystal-clear to track, and it gets the job done.

- **Always leave a couple of reps in the tank.**

Training to failure is quite taxing, especially on exercises like the pull-up. If you take your first set to failure, expect to see significant drops in your performance on the remaining sets.

If you really want to, *take the last set to failure*, but stop as soon as you notice that your technique begins to break down.

So, here's how to start:

1. Pick a conservative weight (assuming you can do 12 bodyweight pull-ups, that'll be 15-20 pounds or 6-9 kilos). Either a dumbbell between your feet or a weight belt.
2. Grab the bar and do three sets of 6-10 reps with an RPE of 7 to 8.
3. Come back three or four days later and repeat. Call it a week.
4. Return on the following week and do it all again.

The progression:

Once you do three sets of 10 reps with good form, a full range of motion, and an RPE of 7 to 9 (meaning, one to three reps left in the tank), increase the weight and start working up from 6 to 10 again. For example:

**Week 1:** 3 sets w/ 7.5 kg x 9, 8, 7

**Week 2:** 3 sets w/ 7.5 kg x 10, 9, 8

**Week 3:** 3 sets w/ 7.5 kg x 10, 10, 9

**Week 4:** 3 sets w/ 7.5 kg x 10, 10, 10 (good form, full ROM, no sets taken to failure)

**Week 5:** 3 sets w/ **10 kg** x 7, 6, 6

It's better to progress more conservatively and always pay full attention to your technique and RPE. Better to take things slowly than to try and increase the weight too quickly, only to find yourself doing crappy repetitions with a weight that is too heavy for you.

[Read The Whole Guide Here](#)