

Lift Heavy Keep Your Muscle While You Lose the Weight

Why strength matters more in a calorie deficit, how to get started and how to build a program that sticks.

Ian Strand, DO, FAAMM, ABAARM

Founder & Clinical Director, Asymmetric Health

Lacey, WA · Telehealth statewide

Strength Is the Currency of Longevity

Your body was built to climb, carry, push and pull. Modern life asks for almost none of that.

Most of us sit behind a computer all day. Unless you work in the trades, physical effort is optional, and muscle you don't use starts to go. That's sarcopenia: the slow loss of muscle mass and strength with age. It starts in your 30s and it speeds up every decade after.

Look at the 60, 70 and 80-year-olds in your life. Some move well. Some don't. Decide which group you want to be in.

Muscle does a lot more than move you around.

It sets your metabolism

Skeletal muscle burns far more energy at rest than fat. The more of it you carry, the more you can eat at your goal weight.

It's the blood sugar sink you control

After a meal, glucose leaves your bloodstream for several places, including your liver, your fat and your muscle. Muscle is the one you control. Build more of it and you have more room to store and burn that glucose. Without enough, glucose lingers, insulin resistance follows and diabetes isn't far behind.

It protects your bones

Muscles pull on the bones they attach to, and that load keeps bone dense. Skip it and osteoporosis moves closer, along with fragility fractures: the vertebra that breaks bending over to dry off after a shower, the hip that snaps turning in the kitchen.

It predicts how long you'll live, and how well

Some of the best predictors of disease and death are physical: VO2 max, grip strength and how quickly you can stand up from a chair and walk. Add body composition (how much of you is lean mass and how much is fat) and those predictions get sharper.

THE SHORT VERSION

Lifting isn't just for athletes. It's maintenance for anyone who plans on getting old.

Lose Weight, but Choose **What Kind**

Eat less than you burn and you'll lose weight. The question is what kind.

A calorie deficit means your body can't fuel all the tissue it has, so some of it has to go. Your body won't shrink your brain to cover the gap. Or your liver. Or your heart. That leaves two choices: fat and skeletal muscle.

Ideally, 100% of the weight you lose would be fat. It never works out that cleanly. You'll always lose some of both, but the split is up to you.

GLP-1s make this problem bigger

GLP-1 medications cut cravings, increase satiety and keep you full longer between meals. That makes a deficit much easier to create and hold. That's why they work. It also magnifies the muscle problem.

25–40%

of the weight lost in the major semaglutide and tirzepatide trials (and early retatrutide trials) was lean mass

The problem is big enough that drug companies are now testing GLP-1s paired with myostatin inhibitors, drugs designed to protect muscle during weight loss. Until those arrive, you have a cheaper option. Lift.

What losing muscle costs you

Your resting metabolism slows, so keeping the weight off gets harder. You lose strength. When weight comes back, it tends to come back as fat. Lose muscle on the way down and regain fat on the way up, and you can land at your starting weight with worse body composition than when you began.

We don't chase weight loss. We chase fat loss. The goal is a lean, fit version of you at your goal weight.

Getting there takes two things: a signal and a substrate.

The signal: resistance training

Muscle burns more calories at rest than fat. In a deficit, the easiest way for your body to close the gap is to get rid of the tissue that costs the most to keep. That's muscle, unless you tell it otherwise.

Our ancestors went into a deficit involuntarily. Famine, winter, a lean harvest. Getting food meant using their bodies: harvesting a crop, hunting a buffalo. We don't have to do that anymore, so without a deliberate effort we just waste away.

Resistance training is that effort. Lifting heavy things tells your body this muscle is in use and it can't get rid of it.

The substrate: protein

Training breaks muscle down. Protein is the raw material to rebuild and maintain it. Your Asymmetric Health provider will give you a specific protein target. The GLP-1 holds the deficit, and your job at the table is hitting that protein number.

OUR TAKE

Send the signal with resistance training. Supply the substrate with protein. Do both and the weight you lose comes mostly from fat. This applies to anyone in a calorie deficit. On a GLP-1, it isn't optional.

HOW WE TRACK IT

Body composition scans and your strength numbers. How your clothes fit is worth watching too, since it often moves before the scale does.

Four Ways to Start

Easier said than done. Fair enough. Maybe you've never been much of a gym person. Maybe you were a college athlete and it's been a long time. Either way, getting started can feel overwhelming, and you don't have to figure it out alone. Pick the option that fits your situation.

Option 1: Join a local gym and work with a trainer

The lowest barrier to entry. No equipment to buy and no space needed, so it works in an apartment or a packed house. A trainer keeps you accountable, shows you the machines and the exercises and builds the program, so all you have to do is show up.

You don't need a trainer forever. Work with one a few times a week for two to four weeks. Once the routine is set, carry it on yourself and check in occasionally to save money. Look for a nationally accredited certification (NSCA, ACSM, NASM or ACE). The goal is getting stronger. Soreness tells you almost nothing.

LOCAL OPTIONS

LA Fitness Lacey · Crunch Fitness Lacey · West Coast Fitness Lacey · Whetstone Fitness · Alliance Athletics · Athena Fitness and Wellness (women only) · Training for Warriors Olympia · Define Fitness · Transformation Fitness

Option 2: Get a smart home gym

If lifting in front of other people is the barrier, or you live somewhere without a gym you can reliably get to, start here. These units have a small footprint. Some mount to a wall. Their magnetic resistance moves in very small increments, and the membership includes full programs run by a trainer. Pick a program, walk into the spare bedroom, hit start. The machine sets your weights and walks you through each exercise.

Expect a few thousand dollars up front plus a monthly membership.

OPTIONS

Tonal · OxeFit · Speediance · Vitruvian · Tempo

Option 3: Take online classes

If a trainer or a smart gym is more than you want to spend, follow a class at home. Most use your bodyweight or light dumbbells, and the program decides the exercises, sets and reps for you. You can do it in your living room.

OPTIONS

[Ladder](#) · [Les Mills+](#) · [BODi](#)

Light weights only take you so far. As you get stronger, plan to add heavier dumbbells or move to another option.

Option 4: Build a traditional home gym

If you have the space, the budget and the interest, a home gym is great. No commute, no waiting for a machine, nobody filming their workout next to you. You set your own programming and the sky is the limit.

The best foundation for most people is a power rack combined with a functional trainer (a cable system). The rack handles barbell squats, presses and pull-ups. The cables cover rows, pulldowns and pressing variations. Together they cover all six movement patterns in Chapter 04.

OPTIONS

[Rogue Fitness functional trainers](#) · [Force USA Cornerstone](#) · [REP Fitness Ares 2.0](#) (adds cables to a REP rack)

Round it out with a barbell and plates, an adjustable bench and adjustable dumbbells.

OUR TAKE

A full home gym takes real money, space and commitment, so it isn't the right first step for most people. Building out gradually works well: start with a smart home gym, add a treadmill or bike, then expand into a rack and bench as your interest grows.

Build a Full-Body Program

Whether you're doing your own programming or want a framework to bring to a trainer, here's what we recommend.

Full body, three times a week minimum. Four is better.

If you have five or six days a week to give the gym and you love it, a split routine (push, pull, legs) is fine. You're probably not reading this. For busy parents with jobs, a full-body workout every session works better. It hits each muscle three or four times a week, which is plenty of stimulus, and it leaves room to flex around soccer practice, a recital or a last-minute meeting.

Session length

Plan 45 to 60 minutes to start, warm-up included. As your competence and confidence grow, sessions can stretch to about 90 minutes. Past that, you're doing more than you need.

Six movement patterns

Nearly every useful lift fits one of six patterns. Train all six and you've trained your whole body. Pick one exercise per pattern that you can do with good form and the equipment you have.

PATTERN

EXAMPLES

Squat

LOWER BODY

Goblet squat, barbell back squat, front squat, leg press, split squat

Hinge

LOWER BODY

Romanian deadlift, deadlift, hip thrust, kettlebell swing

Vertical push

STANDING, OVERHEAD

Dumbbell shoulder press, barbell overhead press

Vertical pull

PULLING DOWN

Lat pulldown, assisted pull-up, chin-up, pull-up

Horizontal push

ON A BENCH

Push-up, dumbbell bench press, barbell bench press, chest press

Horizontal pull

ROWING

Dumbbell row, cable row, chest-supported row, inverted row

Workout A and Workout B

Split the six patterns into two workouts of three exercises each. Each one covers your lower body, a push and a pull.

WORKOUT A

Squat
Vertical push
Horizontal pull

WORKOUT B

Hinge
Vertical pull
Horizontal push

Alternate them. Three days a week looks like A, B, A one week and B, A, B the next. Four days a week is A, B, A, B. There's no need for a rigid train-rest-train schedule. The routine has to fit your life to last a lifetime.

Favor compound lifts

Make at least one exercise in each workout a compound movement. Two is better. Compound lifts move more than one joint and load several muscle groups at once. A squat works your hips, knees and ankles and loads everything from your quads to your core. A leg extension works one muscle. Isolation work has its place, but compound lifts give you the most return for your time.

Two hard working sets per exercise

A working set ends at or near failure, with no more than two reps left in the tank. Failure is the point where your form would start to break. If you rack the weight and think "good pump, I had three or four more in me," that was a warm-up set. Warm-ups don't count.

Three exercises at two sets each is six working sets. That's the whole workout. Six hard sets beat a two-hour marathon you dread going to.

SCHEME	SET 1	SET 2	BEST FOR
Heavier	6–8 reps	Drop the weight, 10–12 reps	Heavy compound lifts: back squat, bench press, deadlift
Lighter	10–12 reps	14–16 reps	Less compound or isolation work: lat pulldown, leg extension

Progressive overload

Something has to change for you to change. Your body adapts to exactly what you ask of it and nothing more. Lift the same weight for the same reps every week and you'll hold steady at best. There are three ways to keep the challenge climbing, and over time you'll mix and match all three.

01 Add a rep

Six reps on your first set of bench press this week, seven next time, eight the time after. More reps means more total work.

02 Add a little weight

When you can't squeeze out another full rep, add the smallest jump available. Bring 1.25-pound change plates to the gym (one per side takes a 225-pound bench to 227.5). Cable machines take 2.5 and 5-pound add-on weights. Magnetic trainers like Tonal move in 1-pound steps. Dumbbells go by whatever increments you have, so when the next pair is too big a jump, add reps first.

03 Add time under tension

Lower the weight more slowly, and pause for a second at the bottom of the rep before you press back up.

Example: six heavy reps on the bench this week, seven the next, and seven felt like failure with no chance at eight. Add 2.5 pounds and build the reps back up.

WHEN A LIFT STALLS

Eventually every lift hits a wall: no extra rep, no extra weight, no more time under tension, stuck for three or four workouts. That's when you switch the variation (dumbbell bench to barbell bench, for example) and start the cycle again.

Write every session down: the exercise, the weight and the reps. You can't beat last week's numbers if you don't know what they were.

Training on a GLP-1

The deficit on a GLP-1 runs deeper than a typical diet. A few adjustments make a big difference.

- **Eat before you train.** A small meal or snack with some protein and some carbohydrate gives you enough fuel to get through the session.
- **Drink more than you think you need.** Sip water through the day, and add electrolytes on training days. Dehydration shows up as dizziness, cramping and workouts that feel harder than they should.
- **Plan around your dose.** A little nausea the day after an injection is common. That's not the day for a heavy lift. Plan it as a rest day.
- **Holding is winning.** Later in the process, progress gets hard. Keep showing up anyway. Maintaining your lifts keeps sending the signal to hold muscle while you keep losing fat.
- **Protect your sleep.** Sleep is its own pillar, but give it at least seven to eight hours. A deep deficit needs the recovery.

! IF YOU FEEL DIZZY

If you get lightheaded or gassed mid-workout, take extra rest between sets and let things settle. If it keeps happening, reach out and let us know.

Turn It Into a Habit

Starting is easy. Maintaining is hard. Being healthy in your 60s, 70s, 80s and 90s takes habits that run on autopilot and steer you toward health. Motivation gets you through the first couple of weeks. Habit carries the rest.

01 Attach it to something you already do

Drop the kids off at 7:30, then go straight to the gym. Or go straight from work with your bag in the car, before you get home, grab a snack and get pulled into email. If your commute is long, a gym near work beats one near home.

02 Decide the details in advance

Look at your calendar a week ahead, with the games, recitals and work schedules in view. Circle the days. Know the day, place, time and workout before the week starts.

03 Make it easy to start

Pack your bag the night before. A home setup helps here too: walk into the spare bedroom and hit start.

04 Lower the bar on hard days

On a rough day, when you're tired or frustrated, go anyway. Commit to the warm-up and do what you can. You might find you have more in you than you thought.

05 Get someone expecting you

A trainer you're paying for the hour, a coworker or a friend you meet at the gym. Two friends with smart home gyms can run the same program and compare notes.

06 Think of yourself as someone who lifts

Drop "I'm not a gym person." Say "I'm someone who exercises" until it's true. A few months in, skipping starts to feel strange.

Never miss twice. Once is noise. Twice is a streak, and it's the start of the wrong habit.

If you planned Monday and Tuesday and miss Monday, Tuesday is non-negotiable. After a week or two off, drop the weights slightly and build back up.

YOUR NEXT MOVE

Pick One Option. Start **This Week.**

Muscle gets built over six months. The first session is the one that counts most.

THIS WEEK

- ☒ Choose your path: a gym and a trainer, a smart home gym, online classes or a home gym
- ☒ Book the trainer consult, order the equipment or start the trial
- ☒ Put your first three sessions on the calendar
- ☒ Start a log: exercise, weight and reps

Questions along the way? Reach out to your provider. Guiding you through this is why we're here.

Asymmetric Health · Lacey, WA · Telehealth statewide · 360-706-1808 · asymmetricehealth.com

This guide is for education only. It doesn't replace an individual evaluation or exercise clearance from a licensed clinician. If you have a heart condition, uncontrolled blood pressure, a recent injury or surgery, or pain that worsens with training, talk with your provider before starting. Links to outside businesses are provided for convenience.