

# An absolute beginners guide to gaining strength.

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People want or need to gain strength for a number of reasons, but they usually fall into one of two camps...

Practical reasons and aesthetics.

- Practical reasons – This includes health benefits. A strong body is generally more injury resistant than a weak one. Or a person may have had an injury and are now in rehab, needing to regain lost strength, or to improve strength beyond a certain threshold to help prevent future injury. Or a person may need increased strength for their job (eg a soldier), or a person may be an athlete and greater strength means a greater chance of winning.
- Aesthetic reasons – These can be put simply as “looking better naked” and I think we all know about this already.

However (and I’m going to sound sexist here again), there are a group of people (usually women who are naturally at higher risk of developing osteoporosis, or brittle bones) who are scared of improving their strength for fear of waking up one morning looking like Arnold Schwarzenegger.



This is like refusing to wear a seatbelt in case the edge of the belt saws their head off...they are avoiding a vital piece of safety because they are afraid of something that just *will not happen*.

But I digress.

Because of this and many other reasons (not least of which is the very good reason of not knowing what to do) I am going to give you my absolute beginners guide to getting stronger.

Now different people want/need to get stronger for different reasons. 2 extreme examples are:

1. The 16 year old spotty kid wanting to look like Arnold.
2. The 60 year old little old lady simply wanting to be able to carry her shopping home and injure herself if she falls.

Now these two examples are about as different as they can get. Their aims might be totally different and their attitudes towards training might be polar opposites.

*“Despite this they are both absolute beginners and their training programmes and aims should be virtually identical.”*

When I say virtually identical, I obviously don't mean in the actual weights used. But I do mean what exercises to do, the number of times to do them etc.

## Initial aims for an absolute beginner

- To learn to use the body in a mechanically safe and more efficient way.
- To strengthen the soft connective tissues of the body (ligaments, tendons etc)
- To strengthen the hard structural tissue (our bones)
- To strengthen the muscles that support and move the body.

So whether you are the spotty 16 year old, or the granny. Your initial aims should be very similar...building the foundations and doing the groundwork to allow specialisation later on.

## What type of training programme?

There are loads of different training programmes available out there. All of them will have their good/bad points and will be more/less appropriate for different people. But I have found the following programme template to work quite well with absolute beginners:

- [Thorough warm up.](#)
- Chest Press : 1-5 (sets) x 5-10 (reps)
- Seated Row : 1-5 x 5-10
- Leg Press : 1-5 x 5-10
- 1 other exercise of your choice
- The Plank : 60 seconds worth (broken into as many sets as needed)
- [Static stretches.](#)



Chest Press



Seated Row



Leg Press



The Plank

And that is it. The whole thing should be easily done in half an hour and it comprises of less than half a dozen exercises. And the reason I use this template is as follows:

## Number of exercises.

Keeping the number of exercises low means you don't have to learn loads of new moves. If you have to learn too many new exercises in one go, all that happens is that you end up forgetting them and doing them wrong. This will almost certainly lead to future injuries and/or a waste of your time and money.

I have 4 main exercises in the above template, and then an extra "1 other exercise of your choice". This is because everyone has a different attitude/personality, and the most important thing is that you *enjoy* your training. Use this final exercise to enjoy yourself. Make the workout your own and do what you want to do. Boys can do their bicep curls and girls can do their tricep kickbacks if they like. Just make sure they are done *after* your main workout and they *don't* interfere with it at all.

We don't have to be perfect *all* the time. As long as we are good *most* of the time, we can get away with being a bit naughty sometimes (just don't let the naughty times interfere with the good ones!).

## Number of sets and reps.

One possible difference between my hypothetical 16 year old boy and little old lady would be here. Pandering to a gross stereotype, I might have the 16 year old doing 1-3 sets of 10 reps, while the sweet little old lady doing 3-5 sets of 5 reps. The reason is:

- The boy is much more likely to let his ego take over and try too much weight too soon. By keeping the reps up, this forces him to keep the weight down a bit and so means less chance of him breaking himself.
- The lady is more likely to tire sooner, so this way she gets to have more rest breaks. This also means her form/technique is less likely to suffer.
- They both end up doing a similar number of reps, so they both get a similar amount of *practice* at doing the actual move.

## Types of exercise.

All the actual exercises are [big, compound moves](#). In other words, each move uses lots of joints and muscles working together at the same time. The reasons are:

- It's more time efficient.
- Helps teach mechanically efficient moves.
- It spreads the load across more of the body, so if they have any particularly weak parts, they are not exposed immediately to stresses directly to that weak spot.
- Helps develop strength evenly across the body. Young boys tend to over emphasise their chest and biceps, while older women tend to over emphasise the backs of their arms. This kind of "nit picking" is rarely a good idea for both practical and aesthetic goals.

## What to expect during/after the first training sessions

- Don't expect too much hard work. Do *less* than you think you are capable of. If you don't you will probably pay for it the following morning in the way of aches and soreness.
- Don't try too many different machines/exercises. Do half a dozen *at most*, and learn the basic do's and don'ts of them. It is much better to do a few things properly and safely than loads of things crappily and dangerously.
- Even if you do less than you think you are capable of, there is a definite chance you may feel aches/stiffness after your first or second session. So far, I have never been with anyone who was stiff after the third go. Your body adapts to the work you give it *very* quickly.

## What to expect during/after the first month

- You will "feel" stronger and be able to do more work and shift heavier resistance/weights. This will *not* be because you have built more muscle (you will build virtually *no* muscle in the first month) but because the muscles you *already have* will have "woken up" and you will be using more of your original potential strength. Anyone feeling "bulked up" in this first month is almost certainly just carrying more fluid in their body. This will settle down within a couple of weeks.
- Your various limbs and bodyparts will start to feel a bit more coordinated and your body will hold itself less like a saggy, water filled balloon, but more rigid and secure.
- Any aches and stiffness you may have felt the day after your initial training will be a thing of the past and wont be occurring now.

## Conclusions.

The above is a good example of a beginners strength programme for virtually everyone, from spotty kid to little old lady. But of course their different attitudes will react to the programme in different ways.

Young lads usually want to do too much too soon. They will probably want to do the latest bodybuilder routine they saw in a glossy mag with a HUGE bloke on the cover. Please realise that the latest bodybuilder routine done by HUGE blokes is *not suitable for an absolute beginner!* You will end up breaking yourself, I promise! You need at least 6 months foundation work to get your body ready to do anything close to the routines you see in muscles mags.

Little old ladies may be against the idea of *ever* increasing the weights. This is a mistake because we get *strong enough, and no stronger*, to do what we are actually doing. If you never increase the weights you are lifting, you will never get stronger.

I hope my ramblings here have not confused you too much! If so, just leave a comment and I'll do my best to answer any questions!