
STRONG AS A MOTHER

PROGRAMMING YOUR WORKOUTS

Introduction

One of the main objectives of SAAM is that you learn exactly what goes into programming workouts - so that you'll never feel stuck or lost again.

If you have any questions about any of this - please ask away! I want you to feel totally confident in your ability to structure a workout plan based on your goals and needs.

Outline:

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4. Exercise Variations
5. Workout Structure
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8. Rest & Active Recovery
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1. Primary Goal

Nearly every aspect of your plan depends on your primary goal. Whether its weight loss, muscle building, maximal strength, improved endurance or agility, or cardiorespiratory fitness - your workouts should reflect that.

Everything - from the types of exercises you choose, to how long you rest between sets, to whether you use machines or free weights - should be aligned with that goal. We'll cover all of these elements here.

In this manual, I focus on recommendations specifically for **weight loss** and for **muscle building**, since those are the goals of most women I work with. If you're not looking to lose much weight and simply want to feel stronger, more toned, and healthier, muscle building should be your focus.

3 important things to keep in mind:

1. Following a muscle-building plan will **not** give you giant bulky muscles, but rather a lean, toned physique.
2. Regardless of how you design your plan, as long as you use **progressive overload** with every workout, you will definitely build muscle. You'll build more of it and faster, though, on a muscle-building plan compared to a weight loss plan.
3. **Diet matters** much more than exercise when it comes to losing and gaining mass. A workout plan without a solid nutrition plan is no bueno.

2. Plan Structure

Just as there are many ways to structure a single workout (what you do on any given day in the gym), there are also many ways to design a training plan (what you'll do over the entire X-week period). When planning, consider how many **days per week** you'll realistically work out, and how often you want to target each major muscle group.

For beginners, the sweet spot is training each major muscle group **2–3 times** per week. Too few workouts won't provide enough stimulus for your body to adapt, while too many won't allow adequate recovery. Choose a schedule that **fits your life**. If you can only train two or three days per week, it's best to use full-body sessions. That way, you're hitting all major muscle groups multiple times each week. If you can commit to four or five days, a body-part split is typically more effective, since training your full body that often can compromise recovery.

What do I mean by **full-body vs split**?

2. Plan Structure

Full-Body

Trains all major muscle groups in each session

- Chest, back, arms, core, lower body

Performed 2–3 times per week, with at least one rest day between sessions to allow recovery.

Ideal for beginners:

- Most **efficient** way to see results - maximum return on time invested
- Prioritizes foundational, compound movements (like squats, deadlifts, rows), which build strength, coordination, and neuromuscular efficiency (the connection between your brain and your muscles)
- Reduces the risk of muscular imbalances that can lead to injury
- Frequent repetition of movement patterns helps develop proper form and control early on.

2. Plan Structure

Body Part Splits

These are better suited for **intermediate to advanced** lifters. Once the basics of strength, coordination, and neuromuscular efficiency are solid, and you're lifting relatively heavy weights, focusing on fewer muscle groups per session becomes more effective for increasing strength, managing fatigue, and promoting recovery.

Common split types:

Upper/Lower Split:

Alternates between upper body (arms, chest, upper back) and lower body (lower back, glutes, legs). Typically done 3–5 days per week.

Push/Pull/Lower Body:

Divides workouts into pushing muscles (chest, triceps, shoulders), pulling muscles (back, biceps), and lower body (back, glutes, legs). Typically done 3 or 6 days per week.

Bro Split:

Focuses on one major muscle group per session - for example, Chest Day, Back Day, Shoulder Day, etc. Typically done 4–6 days per week.

Agonist/Antagonist Split:

Each workout pairs opposing muscle groups (e.g., chest/back, biceps/triceps, quads/hamstrings). Typically performed 3–6 days per week.

3. Workout Variables

Variables like exercise selection, exercise order, number of exercises, reps per set, sets per exercise, and rest time between sets all play a role in designing an effective training plan. These should be tailored to your specific goal.

One **important principle** to remember: there's a trade-off between how much weight you can lift and how many reps you can perform. The higher your rep range, the lighter the weight needs to be. For example, you might squat 40 pounds for 8–12 reps, but if your target is 10–15 reps, you'll likely need to drop down to around 30 pounds.

Below are guidelines for adjusting each variable based on your goal.

3. Workout Variables

Your focus:

Weight loss: Your focus is maximizing calorie burn, and you do that with compound exercises (ones that engage multiple major muscle groups simultaneously), high rep range, and short rest time.

Muscle building: Your focus is maximizing growth of muscle tissue, and you do that by lifting very heavy weights in a moderate rep range, with longer rest periods to allow more recovery between sets.

Exercise selection:

Weight loss: Prioritize the “Big 5”: squat, deadlift, chest press, overhead press, and row. These are foundational, compound lifts that deliver the most return on your effort. You can include variations for some spice. For example, squat variations include front squats, sumo squats, split squats, cable squats, etc. (see [exercise library](#)). Additional exercises can be added to the workout based on personal preference - What do you enjoy? Are there specific areas you want to focus on?

Muscle building: same

Exercise order:

Weight loss: Structure your workouts from most to least demanding. The Big 5 require the most energy and muscle activation, so they should be done first when your energy and focus are the highest. You don't want to pre-fatigue your hamstrings with something like machine curls, only to end up underperforming in squats - an exercise that delivers much more benefit.

Muscle building: same

3. Workout Variables

Number of exercises per day:

Weight loss: 4-6 exercises. Fewer may not provide enough stimulus, and more is unnecessary.

Muscle building: same

Number of sets per exercise:

Weight loss: 2-4 sets. This gives you enough volume to challenge your muscles without being excessive. You can adjust within this range based on how much time you have.

Muscle building: 3-4 sets. Less than 3 likely won't produce enough stimulus to grow, and more than 4 can cause fatigue and impaired recovery.

Number of reps per set:

Weight loss: 10-15 reps. This is considered a relatively high rep range and provides increased calorie expenditure.

Muscle building: 6-12 reps. This is low enough so that you can lift very heavy, and high enough to create the right environment in your muscle cells to trigger growth.

Rest time between sets:

Weight loss: 30-90 seconds. Keeping rest time short helps maintain an elevated heart rate, which increases workout intensity and calorie burn.

Muscle building: 2-3 minutes. This allows enough recovery to maintain performance while keeping the muscle environment primed for growth.

4. Exercise Variations

There are often many variations for a particular exercise. Let's look at the overhead press: there's the overhead press machine, standing barbell press, standing DB press, standing single leg DB press, standing single arm DB press, seated DB/barbell press.... Each variation gives different benefits.

It's helpful to know that there are lots of variations of nearly all exercises, so you can make adjustments to your plan as needed based on preference, equipment availability, history of injuries, etc.

Machine (Isolation) Variations

The target muscle is isolated - that's the only muscle being worked.

Examples: Hamstring curl machine, tricep push-down machine.

- Pros: Easy to use, beginner-friendly, allows focus on target muscles, can move heavier loads with good form because no energy is spent on balance or stabilizing muscles.
- Cons: The fixed path limits functional (everyday) movements, doesn't work the core, and may not fit all body types well.

Free weights (DB/barbell) - Seated Variations

Examples: Seated DB overhead press, incline DB bicep curl

- Pros: Compared to standing, you have more stability, better focus on target muscles, can move heavier loads, and it's easier to maintain form.
- Cons: There is less core engagement, not as functional (applicable to everyday activities) as standing movements.

4. Exercise Variations

Free weights - Standing Variations

Examples: Standing DB overhead press, standing DB bicep curl

- Pros: Engages core, improves balance and posture, burns more calories compared to seated variations, and the strength gained is more applicable to everyday movements.
- Cons: Harder to maintain form, high risk of injury if improper form is used, and less weight must be used because some energy and strength is devoted to maintaining balance/coordination.

Free weights - Single Arm/Leg Variations

Examples: Single-leg deadlift, Bulgarian split squat

- Pros: Large focus on balance and coordination which promotes core strength, mimics everyday movements, can improve muscle flexibility and joint mobility.
- Cons: Must use lighter loads, is more mentally demanding, takes longer to train both sides.

When planning your program, consider your specific goals and choose variations that are in line with it. While it may be tempting to change up the exercises often to cycle through several variations and “keep it interesting,” remember that **progressive overload** is essential for making progress, and it’s difficult to ensure progressive overload is being used when comparing apples to oranges.

5. Workout Structure

There are countless ways to structure your workout, but we're going to keep it simple here. Let's focus on the three that I suggest you use.

Straight Sets:

Perform all sets of one exercise with rest between sets (ex. 3 sets of 10 squats), then move on to the next exercise. Pros:

- You can focus your energy entirely on one exercise at a time
- You're not constantly moving around the gym from one machine to another, possibly losing access to a machine you're not done with

Supersets:

Perform 2 exercises back to back with little to no rest between the exercises; rest after 1 set of both are complete. Pros:

- You save time by spending less time resting
- You increase calorie burn by having less rest time and maintaining elevated heart rate for longer periods of time
- Recommended for fat loss, but in shared spaces, machines may get taken if you step away. Consider pairing up 2 DB exercises or 2 cable exercises.

Circuits:

A sequence of exercises targeting different muscle groups, performed with minimal rest between the exercises. Pros:

- You save the most time by combining many exercises within each set
- You substantially increase calorie burn with a high work:rest ratio
- Recommended for fat loss, but in shared spaces, machines may get taken if you step away. Consider planning a circuit where all exercises use the same equipment, such as 5 exercises that all use the cable machine.

6. Duration of Plan

Progressive overload is key to muscle growth, regardless of your goal. To ensure you're progressing, stick with the same exercises for 8–10 weeks, gradually increasing weight and/or reps. Changing exercises too often makes it hard to track progress. For beginners, it can take **weeks** to build the necessary neuromuscular connections, so it would be a missed opportunity to finally have your body ready for noticeable strength gains, only to switch up the plan too soon.

Why not continue the same plan indefinitely?

Mental burnout:

After a few months of the same workouts, even the most disciplined lifters get bored and need something new.

Missed opportunities for growth:

Different exercises challenge your muscles in different ways. Even the small change from reverse lunge to bulgarian split squats will challenge muscles and joints differently and promote new neuromuscular connections and new growth.

7. Cardio

Dedicated cardio plays a **relatively small role** in achieving our body and health goals. If you're consistent with strength training and walking daily as much as possible, adding in more cardio may not be necessary.

When strength training is done with intensity - pushing your limits each set and resting properly in between - it mimics the pattern of a HIIT workout. Your heart rate spikes during the effort, then recovers during rest, cycling repeatedly. This improves cardiorespiratory and aerobic fitness and absolutely **counts as "cardio."** If you're also getting at least 7K steps per day - that's even more cardio that contributes to improved body composition and overall health and reduces your risk of all-cause mortality.

If you do have time to include additional cardio, I recommend 1-2 HIITs per week, since the benefits are tremendous.

Efficiency: The amount of calories burned for the time spent doing the activity exceeds any other type of exercise .

Fat loss: Thanks to the Afterburn Effect, your body keeps burning calories at an elevated rate for up to 24 hours post-workout as it works hard to restore oxygen levels, clear waste, and repair tissue. This means that hours after your 20-minute HIIT, while you're relaxing on the couch, your body's still burning through calories. *Note: you get this benefit from strength training as well.*

Muscle building: HIITs help build muscle, not waste it as can be the case with moderate-intensity workouts like jogging. The high stress on your muscles causes microtrauma, triggering the same injure-repair-grow cycle as strength training. HIITs also stimulate muscle-building hormones like growth hormone and testosterone, both of which also help mobilize fat for energy.

8. Rest & Recovery

Muscles don't actually grow during the workouts - they grow after. Training causes micro-tears in muscle fibers, and it's during the recovery period that those fibers rebuild stronger. Without enough rest, sleep, and proper nutrition, that growth doesn't happen.

Timing your rest days:

Give at least 48 hours between training the same muscle group. If you follow a full-body routine, rest a full day between sessions. If your program is split (ex. upper/lower), you can train on back-to-back days, as long as each muscle group gets 48 hours to recover. For example: Monday Upper, Tuesday Lower, Wednesday Upper, Thursday Lower.

Active recovery:

Rest doesn't mean doing nothing. On non-workout days, you should engage in "active recovery" like walking, biking, swimming, or yoga. These activities promote blood flow and reduce muscle soreness, speeding up the repair process.

Deload:

A deload, or "deload week," is a planned reduction in training intensity, volume, or both to allow your body to recover, adapt, and come back stronger. It provides both a physical and mental break from the demands of consistent strength training. They are typically scheduled every 8-10 weeks, though in a fat loss phase, when overall stress is higher and recovery is compromised, they may be needed as often as every 6 weeks.

More on dealoads...

8. Rest & Recovery: Deloads

Benefits:

- Promotes deeper muscle repair
- Allows joint inflammation to subside more completely
- Helps reduce cortisol levels elevated by intense training
- Prevents burnout and over-training
- Often marks the transition to a new training block - giving you a fresh sense of motivation and momentum

Types of Deloads:

Volume deload: Reduce the volume (sets/reps) but keep the weight the same

- Example: If your last leg day included squats at 100 lbs for 3 sets of 8, 9, and 9 reps, a deload might be
 - 100 lbs for 3 sets of 4 reps
 - 100 lbs for 1 set of 9 reps

Intensity deload: Reduce the weight, but keep the volume the same

- Example: Using the same workout, your deload might be 70 lbs for 3 sets of 8 reps.

Active recovery: Skip strength training altogether, and instead perform low-impact activities like hiking, yoga, or swimming.

You can schedule deloads proactively, or you can listen to your body and start one when signs of accumulated fatigue appear - like stalled progress, nagging soreness, sluggish recovery, lack of motivation, or burnout.

9. Putting It All Together

Phew! That was a lot.

Don't worry - you don't have to memorize all that. I just want you to know what goes into planning a workout program so you have something to start with when you're ready to branch out on your own! You can always refer back to this when you need to.

Let's do a quick recap. Here are the steps to putting together your very own self-designed strength training plan:

- Be clear on your goal - is your primary aim to lose fat or gain muscle?
- How many days/week you can commit to strength training?
 - 2 → do full-body
 - 4 or more → do splits
 - 3 → your choice. If splits, what type of split do you prefer?
- Using my [exercise library](#) as a guide if you like, write down 4-6 exercises for each day you'll be working out. Make sure to include the Big 5 and any other accessory exercises that suit your preferences. Consider machines vs free weights and standing vs seated.
- Order them from most to least demanding.
- Choose how many reps/set and sets/exercise based on your goal.
- Choose a rest time based on your goal.
- Now zoom out to look at the big picture: Decide how many weeks this program will be - typically they're 8-10 weeks.
- Decide whether you'll include HIIT. If so, 1 or 2 days?
- Consider how to schedule the workout days (including HIITs) to give your body the rest & recovery that it needs.
- Decide if you'll include a deload mid-plan or not until the end of the plan. Keep in mind it's ok to add in an unplanned deload week if you suddenly realize you need it.

STRONG AS A MOTHER

YOU'VE GOT THIS!

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