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Why? If you do the same exact routine, three days a week, for months and months, you might get bored, and start slacking... Or you might find a workout plateau.[7] So if you find yourself hitting a wall, feel free to stick with the above 'formula,' but change the ingredients. If you're hitting a plateau or find yourself getting bored, pick a different exercise or adjust your sets and reps so you stay challenged, and you'll actually DO the workout! Then, focus on getting stronger! (8) You are writing down your workouts, right? "But Steve, what about core exercises like sit-ups or planks? I don't see those listed here." I'm so glad you asked! While it's cool to add more specific core work to your program if you want to, squats, pull-ups, dips and deadlifts all do a great job of challenging your core to stay stable all on their own. If you do add in ab work, we recommend doing so at the end of your program so that you aren't tiring out those muscles before doing your other big, compound lifts. Also, abs are revealed in the kitchen. I know it's really easy to overcomplicate this process as there's an infinite number of exercises, sets, reps, and programs to choose from. And yes, we have a solution for people that JUST want to be told what exactly to do: our uber-popular 1-on-1 coaching program pairs you with your own Nerd Fitness Coach who will get to know you, your goals, and your lifestyle, and develop a workout plan that's specific to not only your body, but also to your schedule and life: **Step #3: How Many Sets And Reps Should I Do?** SIMPLE ANSWER: Not including a warm-up set or two, I recommend: 2 to 5 sets per exercise. 5 to 15 reps per set when starting out.[9] LONGER ANSWER - watch this video: As we cover in our "How Many Sets and Reps?" guide, a "set" is a series of repetitions that you complete without stopping. For example, if you drop down and do 10 push-ups right now, you just did 1 SET of 10 REPETITIONS (or REPS) of push-ups. Got it? Cool. Some general rules on repetitions you can follow as you're starting to build your workout plan: If you're looking to burn fat while building muscle, keep your number of repetitions per set in the 8-15 range per set. If you can do more than 15 reps without much of a challenge, consider increasing the weight or the difficulty of the movement. This is true for things like lunges, bodyweight squats, push-ups, pull-ups, etc. If you want to focus more on building strength, keep your repetitions in the 5-10 range per set. As you get comfortable with the movements, you can move into lower rep ranges - but we pick a range that feels good, and then focus on nutrition. And if you don't want to figure any of this out and just want to be told exactly how what exercises, sets, and reps to do, our online coaches can take care of that for you. **Step #4: How Long Should I Wait Between Sets?** Keep it simple, you "smart, good-looking, funny, modest person" you. Below is a basic formula for you to determine how long you should wait between sets, but this can be adjusted based on your level of health. The goal is to wait the least amount of time you need, but still rest enough that you can perform all reps of the next set safely and properly! Here's why that's important:[12] Adequate rest in-between sets will allow your body to regenerate energy, so you can execute the next set of reps with good form and technique, therefore, decreasing your risk of injury. I'll provide some guidelines for how long to rest based on how heavy you're lifting (not rules set in stone!): 1-3 Reps (lifting heavy for strength/power): Rest for 3 to 5 minutes between sets. 4-7 Reps (lifting for strength): Rest for 2 to 3 minutes between sets. 8-12 Reps (lifting for size/strength): Rest for 1 to 2 minutes between sets. 13 Reps+ (lifting for endurance): Rest long enough to recover to allow you to do the next long-ass set! If you need more or less rest than the above recommendations, that's fine. The key is being recovered enough that you can perform the next set at similar intensity and with great technique. Whatever it takes to get you there, do it![13] Do the best you can, record how long it takes you to rest between sets. The amount of rest you need to take over time may vary. Your body will adjust as you get stronger and healthier! **Step #5: How Much Weight Should I Lift?** We have a FULL resource on how to determine your starting weight for lifting, but I'll give you the gist here. The simple-to-learn but tough-to-implement answer: Lift enough so that you can get through the set, but not too much that you have NO fuel left in the tank at the end. How do you determine how much that is? Trial and error. ALWAYS err on the side of "too light" versus "too heavy" when starting out. It's better to say "I bet I could have done more!" instead of "That was too much, and now I need to go to the hospital!" Plus, when you start working out, you're actually programming your neuromuscular systems to do the movement correctly.[14] You can't rush this, so it's best not to start off too heavy.[15] When is it time to move up in resistance? The NSCA has a 2-for-2 rule that recommends:[16] If a person can do two reps (or more) over their set goal, then they should increase the load. How much should you increase weight? For less trained people (i.e., beginners), it is recommended that for upper body exercises you increase the load by 2 - 5 pounds and by 5 - 10 pounds for lower body exercises. For more trained people (i.e., advanced), it is recommended that for upper body exercises you increase the load by 5 - 10 pounds or more and by 10 - 15 pounds or more for lower body exercises [37] I will say, if you're doing exercises with just your body weight, you need to make each exercise more difficult as you get in shape - once you get past 20 reps for a particular exercise and you're not gassed, it's time to mix things up. That's the key to "Progressive Overload," as Coach Jim explains in this video: Can you do 20 push-ups with no problem? It's time to start mixing them up to be more challenging. Pick a variation from this article and make yourself work for it! 20 bodyweight squats too easy? Hold some weights high above your head as you do the next set. Eventually, you can scale up to do exercises like the pistol squat. Looking for more bodyweight exercises? Check out the list of our favorite 42 bodyweight exercises you can do anywhere. **Step #6: How Long Should I Exercise For?** How Long Should My Workout Be? Easy answer: 45 minutes to an hour. Longer answer: If you're doing 10-20 sets of total exercise (2-5 sets for your 4 exercises), you should be able to get everything done within that 45-minute block.[17] Now, factor in a five or ten-minute warm-up, and then some stretching afterward, and the workout can go a little bit longer.[18] If you can go for over an hour and you're not completely worn out, try increasing the intensity. Less time, more intensity, better results. What if you don't have 45 minutes? Do the best you can![19] What's that? You want to build some cardio into your weight training. That's where this next section comes in. **Step #7: How To Create Supersets And Circuit Training Workouts** For those short on time, a circuit training workout is a highly efficient framework for training. You're getting a cardiovascular workout by consistently moving from exercise to exercise. You're exercising different muscles back to back, giving each muscle group a chance to recover, but in a condensed amount of time. Efficiency for the win! It also increases the amount of calories burned in your post-workout window. [20] If you're familiar with CrossFit, many of those workouts are built on circuit principles. This is also the most effective way to make you involuntarily swear at inanimate objects because you're so tired and beat up. We're going to cover TWO things here: Supersets (or alternating sets). Workout circuits. #1 SUPERSETS The NSCA defines it as:[21] A superset is performing two exercises in a row on two different muscle groups. For example, a superset could look like: Performing a set of squats Waiting one minute Performing a set of dumbbell presses Waiting one minute Then doing your next set of squats And so on. Because you're exercising two completely different muscle groups, you can exercise one while the other is "resting." You're now getting the same workout done in half the time. Also, because you're resting less, your grip has to work harder so your heart is getting a workout too. Jackpot. Let's see how this would play in a sample workout: Lunges alternating with incline dumbbell presses, four sets each, one minute between sets. Wait a few minutes to catch your breath and get set for your next two exercises. Straight leg deadlifts alternating with wide-grip pull-ups, four sets each, one minute between sets. Stretch, and get the hell out of there! #2 CIRCUIT TRAINING A circuit requires you to do one set for EVERY exercise, one after the other, without stopping. Our very own Coach Lauren explains it here: After you've done one set of each exercise in succession, you then repeat the process two, or three, or four more times.[22] I've written about multiple bodyweight circuits here on the site: We also have 15 FREE circuits you can follow in our big Circuit Training roundup guide! **Step #8: How Many Days Per Week Should I Train?** We get this question quite a bit, usually from overeager beavers who decide they are going to go from "sitting on the couch watching The Office on repeat" to "exercising 7 days per week." I would advise something different. I mean you can still watch The Office...but you don't need to be training 7 days a week! We don't want you burning out quickly and falling back to square one, a concern we mention in our guide "How Often Should I Work Out?" Instead, focus on building proper habits and set a goal of 2-3 full-body workouts per week.[23] For starters, your muscles don't get built in the gym, and then get rebuilt stronger while you're resting...watching The Office.[24] By giving your muscles 48 hours to recover between workouts, especially when training heavy, you'll stay injury-free and get stronger.[25] A Monday-Wednesday-Friday workout routine works well to ensure enough time to recover, especially when you are just getting started. If you want to do Tuesday-Thursday-Saturday, or Sunday-Tuesday-Thursday, great. And we get it. Life doesn't always perfectly align with this every-other-day schedule. The most important thing is to do the work with the time you have. Then, pay attention to how you are recovering in between workouts. Are you still sore and tired when you begin your next workout? Do you notice you are having to use lighter and lighter weights because you are too fatigued? It may be worth trying to give yourself more time in between workouts so you can recover! "But Steve, what if I WANT to exercise on my off days?" That's fine! Just pick "exercise" that's fun for you and that won't exhaust your muscles. (Same questions as above.)[26][26]However, don't forget that recovery is key to preventing injuries and allowing the body to rebuild itself after the stress of exercise. If you are looking to exercise on your off days we suggest that you cross-train. Cross-training involves engaging in a training routine or exercises that are different from what you normally would do. For example, if you always run for cardio, we would suggest that you change things up and go on the elliptical or bike. This allows you to stay active on your off days while also allowing the muscles that are always stressed from running to rest and recuperate. (Haff G, Triplett NT. (2016). Essentials of strength training and conditioning. Fourth edition. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics).[25] Also, here's a lifehack: Program your workouts INTO your Google calendar (or Outlook). You're much more likely to do a workout that has been planned for in your work week! Alternatively, you can hire a coach to program your workouts for you, so every day you know exactly what you need to do! **Step #9: Keep Track Of Everything!** Last but not least, keep a workout journal! As they say, that which gets measured gets improved. You should be getting stronger, faster, or more fit with each day of exercise. Around these parts, we say "Level up your life, every single day." So track and measure your progress! Things to track and record for your workout: Can lift more weight? Can you lift the same amount of weight more times than before? Can finish the same routine faster than before? If you see your numbers improving (more weight, faster times, etc.), then you're getting stronger and gaining more lean muscle mass![27] Woot. Personally, I track all of my workouts in Evernote. I note the sets, reps, weight, and date. I have over 1,000 workouts in my folder, which makes it super simple to see what I did last month, or even last year, and to make sure I'm improving! You can use an actual notebook, a bullet journal, an Excel spreadsheet, a workout app, or a Word document. Don't overcomplicate it. Write down the date and your sets, reps, and weight for each exercise. Compare yourself to your previous workout with those exercises. Focus on getting stronger (more reps, heavier weight, an additional set, etc.) Repeat. Do this with a workout you've built, and you WILL get results.[28] For more here, check out: #1 The guide How to Check Your Progress #2 Our advice on How to Set a New Personal Record #3 The video How to Journal to Reach Your Goals Steve, Just Build A Workout For Me! If you're looking for sample workouts to build off of, take one of the 6 Workouts in our "Gym 101" guide. Or if you want a plan to follow, pick one of our 15 Circuit Training Routines! If you want to build from scratch, great! Let's break it down into easy chunks with this recap: Warm-up - 5-10 minutes on a bike, rowing machine, jumping jacks, running up and down your stairs, etc. Get the blood flowing and your muscles warm.[29] Pick one exercise for each big muscle group - quads, butt and hamstrings, push, and pull.[30] Do 2-5 sets for each exercise. (Start with lower sets to begin with.) Do 5-15 reps per set for each exercise. (If you aren't sure where to start, 10 reps is a nice middle ground.) Rest and recovery between sets for each exercise. Keep it simple. 1-2 minutes and adjust from there.[31] Increase your efficiency and work your heart by doing supersets or circuits. This results in a higher EPOC meaning greater caloric expenditure and weight loss! Keep your workout to under an hour.[32] Stretch AFTER your workout.[33] Write everything down![34] Give yourself permission to mess up, learn a little, and keep improving as you train more regularly! More often than not, when I email people back and tell them how to build their own workout, they generally respond with: "Steve, can't you just TELL me what to do? I'm afraid of building a crappy workout." Why we built TWO options for people like that: 1) If you are somebody who wants to know they are following a program that is tailor-made for their life, situation, and goals, check out our Online Coaching Program. You'll work with our certified NF instructors who will get to know you better than you know yourself and program your workouts and nutrition for you. 2) Join the Rebellion (our free community) and I'll send you free guides, workouts, and worksheets that you can read at your leisure. We need good people like you! I certainly encourage you to try and build your own workout routine. It can really help you develop a sense of excitement and pride when you start to get in shape based on your workout! -Steve PS: Check out the rest of our beginner content. I promise, it kicks ass ### Photo Sources: mdwombat, joshasman: Question Finger 6, black.zack00: Yeaaaah.... Surprise ladies!!, Sterling College: Sterling Gym, ako_law: Stopwatch, black.zack00: Boxing a gentleman's sport, Photographing Travis: Kettlebells, ahockley: DDC Stuff Sheath and EEEK Field Notes, Ivan Kruk © 123RF.com