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The Fundamentals

The things I wish someone had told me on my
first day in the gym

I am not a doctor or a dietitian. This guide is general education, not a personal plan. If you have any medical condition or injury, check with your doctor before you start.

The idea the whole guide is built on

Nothing here comes ready

Everything in this guide is something you develop. Your form develops. Feeling the muscle develops. Knowing how hard to push develops. Even food: at the start you eat roughly, and later you learn to count.

Nobody has ever walked into a gym on day one knowing what they were doing. Me included. I have been lifting for **13** years, and the first year was all wrong.

So there is nothing to wait for. You start before you are ready, and being ready gets built by repetition, not by reading.

If you wait until you feel ready, you will wait your whole life

The mistakes that cost me years

Every one of these cost me time I cannot get back. If I save you even one of them, this guide did its job.

1 I changed my program every month

You cannot know whether something is working for you until at least 8 weeks in. I changed every time I saw a new video, and I stayed in the same place for two years.

2 I loaded weight I could not handle

So somebody would look. A weight you cannot control is not training, it is showing off.

3 I thought soreness was the scoreboard

If I was not sore the next day I felt like I had done nothing. Soreness is not the measure. Your numbers are.

4 I never wrote down a single number

I would walk into the gym trying to remember what I lifted last week. You do not remember. And without writing it down, there is no progressive overload at all.

5 I trained 6 days when I could not recover from 3

Extra training is not training, it is fatigue on top of fatigue. Muscle gets built while you rest, not while you are in the gym.

The only thing that changes your body

Progressive Overload

This is what forces your body to get stronger and bigger over time.

6–8

the rep window everything in this guide runs on. Find a weight that fails you inside it, then spend months beating it.

- Pick a weight you fail on between 6 and 8 reps
- Stay on the same weight and the same exercise
- Over time the reps will climb on their own
- The moment you reach 9 reps on that weight, add weight until you are failing between 6 and 8 again

Note

If you are doing 2 sets and you only got 6 reps on the first one, drop the weight on the second so you stay inside 6 to 8.

Next: how to find that weight in the first place

Before the last page can work

How to find your starting weight

The page before this says pick a weight you fail on between 6 and 8 reps. Nobody knows what that weight is on day one. Here is how you find it, and it costs you one session per exercise.

1 Start embarrassingly light

Lighter than you think. The empty bar, or the lowest plate on the stack. You are not testing yourself, you are measuring.

2 Do 8 reps and judge it

Moved easily? That is not your weight. Rest a minute.

3 Add the smallest jump available

Usually 2.5 to 5kg. Do 8 again.

4 Repeat until a set gets genuinely hard around rep 6 to 8

That is your starting weight. Write it down before you forget it.

After two or three weeks you will know your number on every machine you use.

And four light sets spent finding a weight is not a wasted session. It buys you twelve weeks of walking in knowing exactly what to load.

Without this, none of it works

Your numbers

Progressive overload is built entirely on knowing what you did last week. And you will not remember, no matter how sure you are that you will.

After every set write down the exercise, the weight, and the reps. That is all. On paper or in Notes on your phone.

Monday · Upper	
Chest Press	40kg × 8, 7
Lat Pulldown	45kg × 7, 6
Shoulder Press	25kg × 8, 6
Cable Row	50kg × 6, 6

Week	Chest Press
One	40kg × 6, 6
Two	40kg × 7, 6
Three	40kg × 8, 7
Four	45kg × 6, 5

Same person, four weeks. Nothing dramatic, just numbers going up slowly. This is how you know you are moving even when the mirror says you are not.

What failure actually means

Failure is the rep that will not move. Not the rep that got hard, and not the rep where you decided you had enough.

RIR	What it means in the gym
RIR 0	Done. Nothing left in the tank
RIR 1	One rep left, barely
RIR 2	Two left. Hard, but with a margin
RIR 3+	Too easy. Add weight

- **Big lifts**

Squat, Bench, Leg Press: stop at the rep you know will not go. Do not attempt it while you are under the bar.

- **Machines and cables**

Attempt the rep that feels impossible. Sometimes it moves, and when it truly does not, that is real failure. The machine makes it safe.

At the start, most people stop 2 or 3 reps before failure while being convinced they got there. That is normal. Judging failure is a skill you pick up over a few weeks, not something you know on day one.

How many days, and how much work

Split your week

Days	The split
3 days	Full Body Train · Rest · Train · Rest · Train · Rest · Rest
4 days	Upper / Lower Upper · Lower · Rest · Upper · Lower · Rest · Rest
5 days	Upper / Lower / Push / Pull / Legs Upper · Lower · Rest · Push · Pull · Legs · Rest

All three work. The difference is not in the result, it is in how much you can actually stick to. 3 days you finish beats 5 days you quit after a month.

And how many sets

2 to 3 working sets per exercise, and 10 to 20 sets per muscle per week.

Two sets you give everything to beat five sets at half effort.

Next: what each of those days actually trains

So the page before it is usable

What each day trains

Day	Muscles
Full Body	Everything, in one session
Upper	Chest, back, shoulders, arms
Lower	Quads, hamstrings, glutes, calves
Push	Chest, shoulders, triceps
Pull	Back, biceps
Legs	Quads, hamstrings, glutes, calves

This tells you what a day is *for*. It does not tell you which exercises to do, how many, or in what order, because that is a program and this is a guide.

Pick movements you can control that hit the muscles listed, keep them the same for a few months, and let your numbers tell you whether it is working.

Notice nothing is trained two days in a row. That spacing is not an accident, it is the rest that lets the last session turn into muscle.

Nobody tells beginners this

How long to sit between sets

Type	Rest
Big compound lifts	2 to 3 minutes
Machines and isolation	1 to 2 minutes

Resting less does not burn more fat. It just makes your next set worse, which means less weight on the bar, which means less overload, which means less muscle. You are not doing cardio, you are trying to lift more than last week.

The clock is there to keep you honest, not to rush you. The real target is simple: rested enough to give the next set your full effort.

Cutting rest to finish faster costs you the exact thing you came for

The corner you are standing in

Machines are not cheating

Beginners think free weights are real training and machines are cheating. It is backwards, and that belief is what keeps people standing at the edge of the gym doing nothing.

- **A machine holds the path for you**

So all of your effort goes into the muscle instead of into balancing. That is exactly why the failure rules earlier let you push machines all the way and tell you to stop short on the barbell.

- **Free weights are still worth learning**

They build control and they carry over to life outside the gym. Just not in week one, and not while the gym is full and you are self conscious.

- **Start mostly on machines**

Add one or two free weight movements you can genuinely control, and grow that side as your confidence does.

The best exercise is the one you can do hard, safely, and repeat next week

Form

Nobody's form is right on day one

Some people wait to learn the form before they start. They never learn it. You learn form while you are doing the exercise, not while you are watching it.

The only thing you need at the start is a weight light enough to control, and a full range of motion. All the way down, all the way up. Half a rep with a big weight gives you nothing.

For the first few weeks your weight will be lighter than you can handle, and that is on purpose

You are learning the movement, not proving anything to anyone.

Food

The simplest version

Only two things matter.

- **Calories set the direction**

Want to lose? Eat below what you need. Want to gain? Above. No food burns fat, and no food makes you fat on its own.

- **Protein does the building**

Take **1.6 to 2.2g** per kg of body weight per day. At **80kg** that is **130 to 175g**, spread across **3 or 4** meals.

And at the start, do not count. Start with the plate

A palm to two palms of protein, a fist or two of vegetables, a cupped hand of carbs (rice, potato, bread, oats), and a thumb of fats (olive oil, nuts, avocado).

Counting is more accurate, and I count. But if you start counting in week one, most of you will quit in the first month. Start with the plate, and once it is a habit, count.

The one supplement

Creatine, and nothing else

There is exactly one supplement with enough evidence behind it to be worth your money, and you can start it on day one. You do not need a year of training behind you first.

Question

Answer

What	Creatine Monohydrate, any brand
How much	3 to 5g a day
When	Any time, with or without food
Training days only?	No. Every day
Loading phase?	No
Cycle on and off?	No

Now the honest part. It is a few percent, not magic. Over months it means a rep or two more on a set and a bit more water held inside the muscle. But a few percent on every session for a year adds up, it is the most studied supplement that exists, and it costs about the same as two coffees a month.

The scale may go up 1 to 2kg in the first few weeks. That is water inside the muscle, not fat. Do not panic and do not stop.

Before you spend money

Things you don't need

- **Every other supplement**

There is exactly one worth buying and it has its own page. Fat burners, BCAAs, test boosters, pre workout: they sell you the feeling of doing something. Protein powder is convenient food, not a supplement.

- **A belt**

Belts are for very heavy loads on advanced lifters. What you need is a strong midsection, not a belt.

- **Detox and fat-burning drinks**

Nothing burns anything. Your liver and kidneys have been doing that job for free your whole life.

- **Fasted cardio**

Same burn in the end. The timing of cardio matters for exactly one reason: whether it is a time you can keep doing.

- **Soreness as a measure**

There are people who never get sore and keep progressing, and people who get sore every session and go nowhere. Your numbers tell you the truth, not your muscles.

Realistic expectations

What year one actually looks like

Month 1 to 2

The mirror will not change, but your numbers will climb fast. That is because your body is learning the movement more than it is building muscle. This is where most people quit, and it is exactly the stage where the work is working.

Month 3 to 6

People start noticing, and usually not you. Someone else will tell you first. Weights that felt hard now feel normal, and training has become a habit instead of a daily decision.

Month 6 to 12

This is where you see it in photos rather than in the mirror. Take a photo every month in the same place and the same light, because you see the mirror every day and that is exactly why you miss the change.

Realistically, in a first year of serious training: around **1kg** of muscle a month for men and roughly half that for women, and that is a ceiling under good conditions, not a promise.

Everything in one place

The cheat sheet

Reps per set	6 to 8
Working sets per exercise	2 to 3
Sets per muscle per week	10 to 20
Add weight when	you hit 9 reps
Effort on working sets	RIR 0 to 1
Rest, big lifts	2 to 3 min
Rest, machines	1 to 2 min
Days per week	3, 4 or 5
Protein	1.6 to 2.2g per kg
Creatine	3 to 5g, every day
Sleep	7 to 9 hours
Steps	8000 to 10000 a day
Log every set	exercise, weight, reps
Change nothing for	4 weeks

| Screenshot this page and keep it on your phone

Before you close this

One thing

You do not have to apply everything in this guide starting tomorrow. Take one thing: pick a split, write your numbers down, and change nothing for 4 weeks.

After 4 weeks, go back to your numbers. If the numbers went up, you are on the right track. If they did not, check these three before you change the program:

- Sleep 7 to 9 hours. Sleep is when muscle actually gets built
- Walk 8000 to 10000 steps a day
- Drink water all day, not just in the gym

Slowly. It's a long road

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