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How do I get started in the gym lifting weights?

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So you've never been to a gym and are keen to start, but something's holding you back. Perhaps you don't know what to actually do in there or feel like you'll just look stupid in front of everyone. Maybe you're worried about injuring yourself.

It's OK. Everyone starts somewhere. I did, too.

Resistance exercise (such as weight lifting) is really good for your health. Benefits include a reduced risk of osteoporosis-related fractures, reduced risk factors for chronic diseases such as diabetes, better sleep, improved mental health and, of course, stronger and bigger muscles.

So, how do people get started in the gym? Here's what you need to know, and what the research says.

Worried about injury?

Don't be. It's probably less risky than lots of other forms of exercise you might already do or did in the past.

Team sports such as rugby and soccer, and strength-based sports such as powerlifting, weightlifting, and cross fit all have similar injury rates. They're all in the vicinity of three to four injuries per 1,000 hours of participation.

Going to the gym has almost half this rate of injuries, at about 1.8 per 1,000 hours.

Let's put that into context.

If you go to the gym three times per week for a one-hour session – and you do that every week of the year – you achieve approximately 156 hours of resistance training exercise a year.

So if the injury rate is about 1.8 injuries per 1,000 hours, that means that you could exercise for *years* in the gym without even a little niggle!

Some groups, such as young men under 40, may be at a greater risk of injury in the gym. So if that's you, you may want to be a little more conscious about how fast you progress, and the types of exercises you do in the gym.

Compare these injury risk stats to the known risks of sedentary lifestyles, and the worry should go out the door.

In short, it's a lot more dangerous to be sedentary than it is to go to the gym.

OK, how do I get started?

It's fine to begin with what you feel most comfortable with. You don't have to go straight to a ridiculously complex or challenging program.

However, that doesn't mean you don't need to put in the effort!

Most gyms can start you off by designing a workout program for you (you might have to pay for a personal training session). If you have a medical condition, find an accredited exercise physiologist. They're trained to help you exercise safely.

It's OK to start with gym machines, which are designed to make it easier to keep your movements consistent.

But keep your mind open about trying the free weights section (where the dumbbells, barbells and mirrors are). Benefits from this type of training may vary from what you get via machines.

That's because a lot of the moves you do with free weights are what's called compound exercises, meaning they work a lot of muscles and joints together at the same time. They're really good for you. Examples of compound exercises include:

- squats
- lunges
- deadlifts
- bench presses
- hip thrusts

- kettle bell swings.

 A woman lifts weights while being supervised by a trainer.

Most gyms can connect you with a trainer to show you what to do. PeopleImages.com - Yuri A/Shutterstock

How much should I do in the gym?

Standard government [physical activity recommendations](#) state you should do muscle strengthening twice per week.

If you are new to the gym, you can make progress with a [minimalist approach](#). For example, you may choose to only lift once or twice per week, compared with many seasoned gym-goers who might lift four or five times per week.

[Recent research](#) shows even those people already consistently lifting in a gym can maintain or slowly improve by doing just two sessions per week, in which each exercise is only performed for one set and the whole session lasts just 30 minutes or so.

So if you can stick to one hour per week (made up of two challenging half-hour sessions) then you will still be making progress.

How do I make my habit stick?

Sticking to the habit after the novelty has worn off is where [many come unstuck](#).

Some research suggests it [takes six weeks](#) to form a gym habit, and that the more frequent the attendance in those first six weeks, the more likely the habit will stick.

At the one-year mark, the biggest [predictor of regular attendance](#) (defined as twice per week) was enjoyment. This was followed closely by the concept of self-efficacy (believing in yourself and your ability to stick to it), and social support.

This is really important.

Find what you like about the gym. Train the way that you enjoy. Find a friend to join the gym with. That will help you create the habit.

From there, you can progress the types and intensity of gym exercises you do.

 A man sweats while lifting weights

It's OK if it's hard at first. I love photo/Shutterstock

I feel like a duck out of water

Every gym-goer felt this at first. I did too.

The confusion about which bit of the machine to sit on, pull, or push, is a tad overwhelming.

The sense of security in sticking to the familiar, shying away from the free weight area.

Remember: everyone is there to improve themselves and is on their own journey.

Most people won't even notice that you are there, and most experienced gym-goers will be delighted to help if you're unsure.

If that's not your experience at your local gym, perhaps look for a new and more welcoming environment. Not all gyms and gym cultures are created equal.