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## Training frequency for older lifters

One of the most fundamental decisions every lifter needs to make is how often he or she needs to train each week. A related question is how often each muscle or body part needs to be trained each week. Train too often and you can't recover. Don't train enough and you regress to (or below) baseline between workouts. Obviously, this is an important programming factor! If you're like most lifters, your ideal workout frequency is three times per week. This recommendation contrasts sharply with a few of the more popular training styles practiced today: Squat Every Day I've seen some compelling arguments made for the so-called "Bulgarian" approach by coaches I like and respect, but for reasons I'll outline below, the high-frequency lifestyle is less than optimal for most. Bro-Splits This is where you have a leg day, a back day, an arm day, and so on. Everything gets hit roughly once a week. If you're so damn big and strong that you need six days to recover from training a body part, then this is a great training structure. But assess yourself honestly - does your chest workout mess you up so badly that you need almost a week to recover? Probably not. Push-Pull This is the "next best" of these three examples, but two upper and two lower days per week probably isn't enough frequency, unless you can bench over 350 and squat over 500. If you haven't quite arrived at these numbers yet, you'll be better off training each body part a bit more often. If you haven't done much research on the bodybuilding, weightlifting, and powerlifting stars of the 50's, 60's, and 70's, you might be more impressed than you expect. Despite the relatively primitive state of drugs, nutritional science, and recovery modalities back then, there were plenty of strength and physique athletes who could give today's stars a run for their money, guys like Franco Columbo, Anatoly Pisarenko, Bill Kazmaier, and Doug Young, just to name a handful. That's not to say all successful strength and physique athletes trained three days a week back in the day, but a lot of them did. And in fact, one of the most well-established and successful training routines of all time is the legendary "5x5" program by Bill Starr, which - you guessed it - used a three-day training structure. This program (and variations of it) are the bread and butter of strength coach and T Nation contributor Mark Rippetoe, who specializes in beefing up young guys so fast that they're often accused of juicing. Probably you, Three training days a week tends to work best for guys between 185 and 225 pounds with lifts in the following neighborhood: Squat: 300-350 pounds Bench: 225-275 pounds Deadlift: 365-405 pounds If you're significantly smaller and/or weaker than this, consider whole body workouts about four times a week or roughly every other day. If you're stronger, go with the push/pull system. If you're freakishly big and strong, go with the bro-split, bro. There's also a lifestyle consideration that impacts this decision. If you work a lot, especially in a physical job, or have high levels of stress or outside commitments, limiting your workouts to three a week will pay off in spades. Training is only beneficial if you can recover from it, and your workouts are only one form of stress you experience in the course of a day. It should be noted that back in the 50's, 60's, and 70's, most occupations involved more physical labor than they do today. This is likely one big reason (along with fewer pharmaceuticals) why the three-day training schedule worked so well. So if you work construction, or are just on your feet all day at your job, three days a week will be a game changer. Finally, remember that the law of diminishing returns applies to training frequency in an unmistakable way: Is training twice a week better than once a week? You bet. A lot better. Is three times a week better than two? Nearly all training experts would say yes. What about four times a week? Here's where things begin to get "iffy." For some people yes, others no. But in either event, even if four is better than three, it's likely only marginally better. So even if you doubt the premise that three sessions a week is better than four, you can't as easily dismiss the efficiency of getting perhaps 90% of the payoff with 75% of the work. With all of that in mind, a very practical litmus test to fine tune your training frequency is to look at your progress in the gym. If you're working hard and getting results, you're probably dialed in. On the other hand, if you're busting tail and not making progress, this means you're not recovering and should consider reducing your training frequency. All else being equal, the more you can disperse your training volume over a greater number of sessions, the better you're likely to do. If we compare three days a week with the push/pull system for instance, you'll notice something interesting. Let's say you typically do 4 working sets for chest, and of course, on the push/pull system, that means 8 sets a week per chest exercise. When you shift to a whole-body, three days-a-week structure, you're now using 12 sets a week, since you'll now be training chest three days instead of two. That's a 50% increase. Seems significant, right? And what's more important, if you're benching in the 225-275 range, is you're probably going to recover in two days, not three to four. If you don't repeat the training stimulus as soon as you're recovered, you'll lose a bit of ground. Week by week, month by month, this adds up to a lot of lost ground. 2 Better Recovery When you lift three days a week, by definition, you're recovering four days a week. Juxtapose this with the earlier point about training more frequently and you begin to see the magic. You actually train each body part more often, while simultaneously allowing for more recovery. That's tough to beat. By "recovery" I mean passive and (possibly even better) active recovery. You could simply rest on your four off days, or do complementary activities such as cardio, foam rolling, mobility work, and so on. When you train on a Monday/Wednesday/Friday schedule, you can schedule these restorative activities on Tuesday/Thursday/Saturday, and then take Sunday totally off if you like. 3 Better Compliance In a recent interview, certified freak of nature and self-proclaimed "World's Strongest Bodybuilder" Stan Efferding stated that consistency is at the top of the list when it comes to training considerations. He meant that no matter how "optimal" a given system or approach is, if you can't or won't do it consistently, it's not going to pay off. Training three days a week allows time for a life outside of lifting - weekends off with the family, time for other hobbies, and enough energy to attend to life's responsibilities without becoming overwhelmed. Consider this if life stress is affecting your workouts. When you train thrice a week, you'll be doing whole-body workouts, meaning, you'll train both upper and lower body in each session. These workouts can (and usually should) be a tad longer than what you'd use if you were training more frequently. Here's what a sample training week might look like: Monday Split Squat Flat Dumbbell Bench Romanian Deadlift Close-Grip Pulldown Standing Dumbbell Curl Lying Triceps Extension Wednesday Pull-Up Back Extension Bench Press Hack Squat Triceps Pushdown Low Cable Curl Friday Deadlift T-Bar Row Front Squat Incline Dumbbell Press EZ-Bar Curl Standing Call Raise Notice a few things about this hypothetical example: The first four movements in each session represent the four primary patterns for strength and hypertrophy development (squat, push, hinge, and pull). The last two exercises in each workout are "optional" movements - things you like to do, or should be doing, that don't fit neatly into the four patterns. These could be anything from direct arm, calf, or ab work, to weighted carries, power cleans, box jumps, or whatever else might fit your needs and circumstances. There's lots of flexibility here, so take advantage. The overriding point is this: If you train the four "big" patterns three times a week each, you'll be stimulating a lot of muscular territory, with the fewest possible number of exercises, with minimal redundancy. In other words, maximum return for your training dollar. In each "neighboring" workout, the exercises selected for each primary pattern are as dissimilar as possible. If you do a vertical pull and a horizontal push on Monday, you'll do a horizontal pull and a vertical push on Wednesday. Since fatigue is specific, varying exercises as much as possible (within the confines of the given template) will allow you to recover faster, and you'll also be less prone to pattern-overload (overuse) injuries. In a Monday/Wednesday/Friday setup, you'll have more recovery time after the Friday session than you'll have after the Monday and Wednesday workouts. For this reason, place the most damaging exercises - the ones that will require the most recovery - on Friday. For me, this means deadlifts, but for you it might be something else. I also tend to be more willing to go hard on the optionals on Friday, knowing I've got more days to heal up. So you might use that day for weighted carries or something similarly masochistic. The Friday session can also be shifted to Saturday with minimal (if any) negative effect on the overall program. So if you're more sore than you anticipated on Friday, or if an unexpected interruption crops up, you've got enough flexibility to make adjustments with no repercussions. Lifting is a bit like cooking in that it results in a great meal, but also a messy kitchen. For many lifters, your off days are best spent working on cleaning the kitchen before it's time to cook again. In my own case, I love to bench and tend to be a bit kyphotic, so I spend time doing mobility drills for my upper back, chest, and shoulders on my non-lifting days, and I also do a fair bit of walking just to move some blood around and burn a few calories. If fat loss is a big part of your goal, those off days are the best time to do formal cardio to accelerate energy expenditure and fat loss. If you're a recreational athlete, use your non-lifting days to practice your sport of choice. Lots of possibilities here. Explore them all. If you're working hard without satisfactory results while training four or more days a week, or if you have a physically demanding occupation, or just have a lot of responsibilities and stresses in life, give this approach an honest run. Remember, there's a lot of room for customization with this template, regardless of whether you're a weightlifter, bodybuilder, powerlifter, strongman athlete, or just a serious recreational lifter. Just apply this template and its foundational principles to your own situation. Get stronger lats, biceps and even abs by doing chin-ups using the reverse 21 method. Here's how.



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