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The Ultimate Guide To Building Your Own Bodybuilding Workout Plan

Making physique progress in the gym takes a skillful approach to program design.

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From [cannonball delts](#) to [cut abs](#), an impressive physique is the proverbial pie in the sky for every gym rat who hits the iron to look good. However, knowing where you want to go is much easier than figuring out how to get there.

If you've ever opened a muscle magazine to find a workout routine that leaves you scratching your head, or tried to copy the [pre-show program](#) of your favorite competitive bodybuilder, you probably know what it's like to be frustrated by twists and turns that might only be clear to tenured physique athletes.



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Below, we lay out the facts for you so you can create and [implement a workout plan](#) that puts you on the path to the physique you've always wanted.

Bodybuilding Programming Explained

While you don't personally need to have a physique or bikini show marked on your calendar, learning how physique pros [structure their approach to muscle development](#) is critical if you're interested in building your own training program. You don't need to have earned your pro card to forge yourself a pro-quality physique.

Bodybuilders tend to sort their training year into two distinct categories. The off-season, commonly considered a "bulking" phase, where athletes try to [pack on as much new lean tissue](#) as possible, and prep cycles, where they "cut" down to [remove excess body fat](#).

Each phase has notably different approaches to nutrition, as well as some significant alterations to training. Recreational lifters with physique-related goals often follow a similar cadence.

Off-Season

If you're an Arnold aspirant, [growing your chest](#) — and the rest of your physique — takes precedence in the off-season. Bodybuilders trying to put on size will typically increase their training volumes, [stack up more plates](#) for higher intensities, and implement special techniques such as supersets, cluster sets, or [tempo training](#) to

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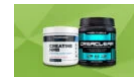
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on training *movements* — physique athletes train *muscles*.



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This means that the tools used to target the biceps, back, [glutes](#), etc. are highly individualized. To get the most out of your training, you need to **experiment with different exercises** and find ones that “click” for your body.

Below, you’ll find a buffet of options organized by major muscle group. There are many more applicable and interesting exercises out there, but these should give you something of a jumping-off point when it comes to designing your hypertrophy program.

Chest Exercises for Bodybuilding

- Dumbbell Bench Press
- [Barbell Bench Press](#)
- [Incline/Decline Bench Press](#)
- [Cable/Machine Flye](#)
- Weighted/Machine Dip

Back Exercises for Bodybuilding

- [Dumbbell/Barbell Row](#)
- [Cable/Machine Row](#)
- [Cable/Machine Pulldown](#)
- [Dumbbell Pullover](#)
- [Barbell/Cable Shrug](#)
- Barbell/Cable High Pull
- Cable Straight-Arm Pulldown
- Back Extension/[Good Morning](#)

Shoulder Exercises for Bodybuilding

- Barbell/Dumbbell [Strict Press](#)
- Dumbbell Arnold Press
- Dumbbell/Cable Front Raise
- [Dumbbell/Cable Lateral Raise](#)
- Dumbbell Hex Press
- Dumbbell/Cable Rear Flye
- [Cable Face Pull](#)

manage frequency

Once you've picked out your favorite toys, it can be tempting to jump the gun and log too many hours in the gym performing your [favorite curl](#) or [crunch](#). Training frequency is a hotly debated topic in bodybuilding circles, with authoritative voices on both ends of the spectrum.

However, modern literature seems to indicate that a frequency of two to three sessions per week, per muscle (or muscle group), is clearly optimal for strength gains. (4) The science is more contentious when it comes to hypertrophy, but most citations back the idea that two sessions per week can produce comparable hypertrophy to one or three workouts, provided volume is equated. (5)



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The essence of this evidence is more straightforward than it sounds — **as long as you're training with enough volume, how you divide that volume up on a weekly basis isn't going to make or break your gains**. Most athletes would probably have more success [getting their weekly leg training](#) in over two separate days instead of one monstrous workout.

Sample Bodybuilding Programs

It's easy to get caught up in the details of training science and become intimidated by the jargon. While paralysis by analysis is definitely a real thing, rest assured that the practical takeaways when it comes to [training for size](#) are fairly straightforward. To help light your way, let's look at two example bodybuilding-oriented programs — one based around **Bodypart splits** and one designed as an **Upper/Lower routine**.

Bear in mind that these routines are *samples*. As long as you adhere to the broad principles of program design for hypertrophy, there's flexibility in exercise selection, order, specific rep targets, and other variables. Training for gains should be fresh and fun, not restrictive and tedious.

Sample Bodypart Split for Bodybuilding

This program aims to hit most major muscle groups twice per week with the intent of stimulating growth and [adding inches to your arms](#), legs, and torso, while keeping your waist trim. Since exercise selection is so preferential, feel free to change or remove some of the offerings presented.

Note: The notation is listed as (sets) x (reps).

Day 1: Chest & Triceps

- **Dumbbell Bench Press:** 3 x 8
- **Dumbbell Incline Bench Press:** 3 x 8
- **Weighted Decline Push-Up:** 2 x 12-15
- **Skull Crusher:** 2 x 8
- **Cable Triceps Kickback:** 2 x 10-12

Day 2: Legs, Shoulders, & Abs

- **Barbell Front Squat:** 3 x 6
- **Romanian Deadlift:** 3 x 8
- **Bulgarian Split Squat:** 2 x 10
- **Machine Leg Extension** *superset with Leg Curl:* 2 x 12-15 (each)
- **Dumbbell Arnold Press:** 3 x 6-8
- **Cable Lateral Raise:** 3 x 10-12
- **Face Pull:** 2 x 12-15
- **Weighted Plank:** 3 x 30 seconds
- **Dumbbell Side Bend:** 2 x 8 – 12

Day 3: Back & Biceps

- **Barbell Row:** 4 x 8
- **Wide-Grip Lat Pulldown:** 3 x 8
- **Dumbbell Pullover:** 2 x 12-15
- **Chin-Up:** 2 x 12-15
- **Hammer Curl:** 3 x 6-8
- **Incline Dumbbell Curl:** 2 x 8-10

Day 4: Chest, Legs, & Abs

- **Barbell Close-Grip Bench Press:** 3 x 6-8
- **Weighted Dip:** 2 x 10-12
- **Dumbbell Flye:** 2 x 12-15
- **Hack Squat:** 3 x 6
- **Single-Leg Romanian Deadlift:** 3 x 10
- **Back Extension:** 2 x 12-15
- **Machine Leg Extension:** 2 x 12-15
- **Machine Calf Raise:** 2 x 12-15
- **Hanging Leg Raise:** 3 x 10

Day 5: Back & Arms

- **Dumbbell Row:** 4 x 8
- **Barbell High Pull:** 4 x 8-10
- **Straight-Arm Pulldown:** 2 x 12-15
- **Preacher Curl:** 3 x 8
- **Cable Pressdown:** 3 x 8
- **Cable Overhead Extension:** 2 x 10-12

This routine targets most of the body over the course of five days, ranging from moderate to high volume. Beginners should adjust total sets performed as needed to [avoid overtraining](#) or remove some exercises altogether.

Sample Upper/Lower Split for Bodybuilding

In contrast to the classically high volumes of bodypart splits, Upper/Lower routines lean into [high-intensity techniques](#) and an abundance of compound movements to induce comparable muscle fatigue while also being decent at [developing strength](#) on their own.

Day 1: Upper

- **Dumbbell Bench Press:** 3 x 6
- **Barbell Overhead Press:** 2 x 8
- **Dumbbell Arnold Press:** 2 x 10-12
- **Cable Pressdown:** 2 x 8 + *double-drop set finisher*
- **Close-Grip Cable Pulldown:** 4 x 6-8
- **Wide-Grip Barbell Shrug:** 3 x 8-10
- **Reverse Curl:** 2 x 8 + *double-drop set finisher*

Day 2: Lower

- **Barbell Back Squat:** 3 x 5
- **Hack Squat:** 3 x 8
- **Snatch-Grip Deadlift:** 3 x 10
- **Good Morning:** 3 x 10
- **Cyclist Squat** *superset with Nordic Curl:* *two sets of each to failure*

- **Barbell Calf Raise:** 3 x 12-15

Day 3: Upper

- **Dumbbell Row:** 3 x 6
- **Landmine Row:** 3 x 8-10
- **Wide-Grip Pull-Up:** *two sets to failure*
- **Dumbbell Rear Flye:** 2 x 15-20
- **Incline Barbell Bench Press:** 3 x 6-8
- **Weighted Dip:** 3 x 8
- **Cable Flye:** 3 x 12 + *double-drop set finisher*

Day 4: Lower

- **Barbell Front Squat:** 3 x 5
- **Bulgarian Split Squat:** 3 x 8
- **Romanian Deadlift:** 2 x 10
- **Hip Thrust:** 2 x 10
- **Machine Leg Curl** *superset with* **Machine Leg Extension:** 3 x 12-15
- **Machine Calf Raise:** 3 x 12 + *double-drop set finisher*

Day 5 (Optional): Arms, Shoulders, Abs

- **Dumbbell Curl** *superset with* **Dumbbell Overhead Extension:** 3 x 8
- **Dumbbell Hammer Curl** *superset with* **Cambered Bar Skullcrusher:** 3 x 10-12
- **Face Pull** *superset* **Dumbbell Lateral Raise:** 3 x 12-15
- **Ab Wheel Rollout:** 3 x 6
- **Decline Sit-Up:** 2 x 10-12
- **Side Plank:** *two sets to failure*

One of the main drawbacks of compound-heavy training is a lack of specialized [attention to the smaller muscles](#) of the arms and shoulders — this can be accounted for by including a fifth day that focuses on punishing your biceps, triceps, delts, and abs to ensure your physique is growing proportionally.

Strength Training for Bodybuilders

Pursuing [mountainous bicep peaks](#) doesn't necessarily mean you don't have to train hard and heavy. In fact, overly heavy lifting may be to the detriment of your physique development. While getting "strong" isn't a strict prerequisite for developing impressive muscularity, [strength and size are close cousins](#).

You need only look at some of the [major players in the strength sports](#) to realize how much overlap there is. Athletes like [Lu Xiaojun](#), [Yuri Belkin](#), and [Magnus Ver Magnusson](#) all boast world-class results in their respective sports while also maintaining impressive physiques.



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[Related: [Watch Bodybuilder Chris Bumstead Smoke a 675-Pound Deadlift Triple](#)]

While strength gains shouldn't be your primary focus, adding poundage to your potential can help you with your hypertrophy goals. A weak, [undertrained posterior chain](#) could affect your technique — and thus results — in an exercise like the front squat, which is a fantastic all-around [quad builder](#). If you have little to no [elbow](#)

[extension strength](#), you may not be able to get the most juice out of your dumbbell or [barbell presses](#) on chest day.

Powerlifters [don't neglect their pump work](#) — bodybuilders shouldn't turn a blind eye to their [strength potential](#). Incorporating some heavier sets can benefit both your [performance in the gym](#) and overall physique development.

How to Train on a Cut

If you're passionate about [showing off every striation](#) you've carved into your muscles during the off-season, shedding excess body fat is a main priority. While maintaining muscle is much easier than growing it, doing so during a strict caloric deficit requires some tactful modulations to your training plan. (6)

25x World Record Holder Stefi Cohen Talks Nutrition Strategies



Keep Intensity High

A [restriction of caloric intake](#) doesn't necessitate an immediate or significant drop in training intensity. Many athletes make the error of assuming that because they aren't eating as much, they shouldn't [load up the bar](#) during their workouts.

The reality is that higher intensity resistance training is actually better at [preserving muscle mass](#) during long periods of nutritional restriction. (7) Caloric inhibition doesn't interfere with your ability to perform as much as it does your ability to recover — aiming to maintain (or even increase) your strength levels during a diet can help you [hold onto the gains you've made](#).

Try to maintain your strength in the six to 12 rep range for as long as possible while dieting to help preserve muscle mass.

Adjust Volume As Needed

While you may be able to [keep your personal bests](#) for the majority of your diet phase, diligent attention to the amount of work you're performing in the gym is required to successfully navigate a cut.

A reduction in nutrient intake will primarily affect your ability to perform the same volume of work you may have grown accustomed to during the off-season. As such, if you begin to notice [drops in strength](#), [more aches and pains](#), or [dampened motivation](#), cutting down on your sets, reps, or exercises performed should be a priority.

As you progress through your diet phase, periodically reduce training volume on an as-needed basis.

Add Some Cardio

Any seasoned physique competitor will probably tell you that [endless hours on the elliptical](#) is a frightful, but necessary, part of prepping for a show. While not a physiological mandate, [including some cardiovascular exercise](#) as a part of your training plan during a diet can help you lean out a little faster, even if you don't have stage aspirations. (8)





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Dosage is particularly relevant when it comes to implementing cardio during a cutting phase, however. While your caloric deficit should primarily come from — obviously — restricting calories, increased activity through bouts of low-intensity cardio (think [treadmill walking](#), a [stationary bike](#), or [swimming](#)) can be useful.

Implement a few weekly sessions of low-intensity cardio if you feel your rate of fat loss slowing or stalling as a means of [kicking up caloric expenditure](#).

Tying It All Together

Achieving the look of your dreams is equal parts [dietary diligence](#) and [training tenacity](#). Abs aren't made in the kitchen, they're revealed there. A bodybuilder's regimen is akin to a painter's paintbrush — without it, there's no art.

The landscape of a good bodybuilding routine requires various elements in the proper proportion and orientation. Train hard in the right rep ranges. Select exercises that work well for your body specifically. Rest long enough to recover, but not too much longer than that.

An impressive physique takes chiseled arms, stacked legs, and a [broad back](#). The training plan to get you there, much like the physique you're trying to create, can be a lot more than the sum of its parts.

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