

Strength Training for Women Over 40

A Clear 12-Week Dumbbell Plan for Beginners—
with Illustrated Exercises and Easier Starting
Options

12
weeks, three
4-week phases

2×
a week, about
30 minutes

36
exercise versions across
12 movement families

One light and one medium pair of dumbbells, a sturdy chair, a clear wall, and a little floor space.



Callidus · 2026

FIND YOUR WAY

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CHAPTER 1

Chapter 1 • Why Strength Matters Now

Strong enough for the life you actually live

Strength isn't about how you look in a gym mirror. It's carrying the groceries up in one trip, lifting a suitcase into the overhead bin, getting down on the floor and back up without thinking about it. It's opening the stubborn jar, moving the patio chairs, picking up a grandchild or a twenty-pound bag of dog food—and doing it without a second thought.

Most of us never planned for strength. It was just there. Somewhere after forty, many women notice that it isn't automatic anymore. Stairs feel steeper. You feel a long day of gardening the next morning. You hesitate before lifting something you used to grab.

That hesitation is worth listening to. Not because something is wrong with you, but because your body is asking for a signal it hasn't been getting. This book is about sending that signal—clearly, safely, and twice a week.

Muscle runs on a simple deal

Muscle works on a straightforward agreement: use it, or slowly lose it. When muscles are regularly asked to work against a challenge, they hold on to their strength and can build more. When the challenge disappears, they quietly adapt to doing less.

Without training, strength and muscle tend to decline as we get older. That decline isn't dramatic from one year to the next, which is exactly why it's easy to miss. But it adds up—and it affects the things you care about: how easily you move, how confident you feel on stairs, how much you can carry.

The good news is that this decline is not fixed. Resistance training—working your muscles against a weight, a band, or your own body—is one of the most effective ways to maintain and build strength at any adult age.^{1,2} Expert reviews of the research are clear on this point: adults who train their muscles progressively get stronger, and that includes people well past middle age. You are not too late. You are, if anything, right on time.

Your bones respond to load, too

Muscle isn't the only tissue that listens to training. Bone does too.

Estrogen helps protect bone. When estrogen levels fall after menopause, bone density can drop quickly.³ That's one reason strength training belongs in your forties and fifties rather than "someday." The years around menopause are exactly when bone benefits from a reason to stay strong.

Bone adapts to the forces placed on it. In the LIFTMOR trial, postmenopausal women with low bone mass who did supervised, progressively heavier strength and impact training for eight months improved their bone density and physical function.⁴ That study used heavy lifts under close supervision; this book's beginner plan is not that program. Think of it as the foundation that makes heavier, smarter training possible later. You'll notice this plan has no jumping and no very heavy lifts. That's deliberate: beginners first build the strength, technique, and joint tolerance those methods need. Chapter 9 shows where to go next—and when to get personal guidance for impact or heavy training.

And if you already have osteoporosis or low bone density, strength and balance training aren't off the table. Expert recommendations include them for people with osteoporosis—with individual guidance on which movements suit you.⁵ Chapter 2 tells you when to have that conversation with your doctor before you begin.

Balance, joints, and confidence

Strong legs and a steady trunk make balance easier. That's not a small thing. Feeling sure of your footing changes how you walk through a crowded store, how you step off a curb, how you carry a laundry basket down the stairs.

Many women worry that lifting will be hard on their joints. For most healthy adults, well-chosen strength exercises done with good form are a way to support the muscles around the joints, not a threat to them. Every exercise in this book starts with an easier version, uses a pace you control, and stops well before your form breaks down. If a movement causes sharp or increasing pain, you'll stop—and Chapter 2 explains exactly what to do instead.

What changes around menopause—and what doesn't

Perimenopause and menopause bring real changes. Experiences vary widely: some women have few symptoms, others find hot flashes, sleep problems, or mood changes genuinely disruptive.⁸ Your age alone doesn't tell you which group you're in, and this book doesn't assume.

CHAPTER 2

Chapter 2 • Before You Start

Your one safety page

Strength training is safe for most healthy adults. Read this page once, then go train. It's the only safety page in the book—everything you need is here, so you don't have to wade through warnings on every exercise.

TALK TO YOUR DOCTOR FIRST IF YOU...

- have a heart condition, high blood pressure that isn't controlled, or get chest pain or dizziness with exercise
- have osteoporosis or have broken a bone from a minor fall
- had surgery or an injury recently, are pregnant, or have a condition that limits exercise
- notice pelvic heaviness, leaking, or pelvic pain when you exert yourself

If any of these apply, it doesn't mean you can't train. It means a short conversation first will help you start with the right exercises. Take this book along—the exercise pages and the 12-week overview make it easy to show exactly what you're planning to do.

STOP THE SET IF...

you feel sharp or increasing pain, dizziness, or you lose control of the weight. **Stop the workout and seek urgent medical help** for chest pain, fainting, or unusual, severe shortness of breath.

WHAT'S NORMAL

Muscles working hard, breathing a little faster, and mild soreness a day or two after a new exercise are all normal. Soreness that eases as you move around is your body adapting. Pain that is sharp, stays in one joint, or gets worse as you keep going is not—that's your cue to stop and switch to the easier version, or skip the exercise that day.

Gear: what you need (and what you don't)

THE ESSENTIALS

- **Two pairs of dumbbells.** A light pair and a medium pair (see below).
- **A sturdy chair.** Solid, no wheels, no arms, with its back against a wall so it can't slide. Never stand on it.
- **A clear wall** at chest height, for push-ups.

CHAPTER 3

Chapter 3 • The Basics

Five things that make every workout make sense

You don't need to learn exercise science to train well. You need five ideas. Every session card in this book uses them, so once you've got these, you'll never be confused by an instruction.

1. REPS AND SETS

A **rep** (repetition) is one complete movement—down and up. A **set** is a group of reps done without stopping. "2 × 8" means 8 reps, a rest, then 8 more.

When a range is given—"2 × 8–10"—you choose a number inside it. Start at the bottom; the range tells you where you're heading.

For exercises done one side at a time, "8/side" means 8 reps on your left and 8 on your right. For holds, the number is seconds: "2 × 20 s" means hold for 20 seconds, rest, hold again.

2. GOOD REPS LEFT

This is the most important idea in the book.

Finish every set knowing you could do a few more *good* reps—same speed, same form. Not "I could grind out a few more if I had to." Good reps, the kind that look exactly like your first one.

- **Week 1:** stop with about 4 good reps left.
- **Weeks 2–4:** about 3–4 left.
- **Weeks 5–12:** about 2–3 left.

You never need to test your limit to find out. Just estimate. If you're unsure, choose the lighter weight or the easier version—you'll know more next time.

Why not go all the way? Because you don't need to. A review of studies, mostly in younger adults, comparing training to failure with stopping short of it found that both build strength.⁷ This plan uses spare reps to help you practice controlled movements. Trainers call this "reps in reserve." We call it good reps left.

How to use every card

Every workout in this book is one page. Here's how to read it.

1. **Read the weekly page.** It tells you what's new this week—or that nothing is.
2. **Two write-in cells = two sets.** Pick a number inside the range, starting at the bottom. Write your actual reps (or seconds) and lb after each set; use L/R for each side. "/side" means each side; "sec" means seconds.
3. **Finish both sets, then move on.** Rest as shown on the card—longer if you need it. For one-sided exercises, do all reps on your less steady side first, match them on the other side, then rest.
4. **Getting stronger: reps first, then weight.**
 - Set felt steady, good reps left? **Add one rep next time.**
 - Both sets at the top of the range, the **next two times you do that exercise? Try the heavier pair** (or the harder version) and start again at the bottom of the range.
 - Holds and balance work the same way, with **five more seconds** instead of one more rep.
 - Never in Week 1. One change at a time.
5. **Too hard? Ease up.** Use the easier version from the exercise page, or the lighter weight. If a heavier pair feels like too big a jump, go back and stay at the top of the range for another week or two. That's part of the plan, not a step back.
6. **Swaps count.** Can't get down to the floor, or an exercise doesn't suit you today? Use the swap on the card. Write down which version you did.
7. **Short on time?** Do two sets of the first four exercises and one set of the last two.
8. **Life interrupts?** Miss a session: just do the next one. Miss a week: repeat the last week you finished, a little easier. The full rules are on the Card rules page before Week 1 and in Chapter 7.

Before your very first session, read the safety page in Chapter 2.

Week 1

THIS WEEK

Start at the bottom: 8 reps on main lifts, 8/side on rows and split squats, 5/side on heel taps; farmer hold 20 seconds, suitcase hold 15/side, balance 10/side. Leave about **4 good reps left**. Find manageable versions; no heavier weights or harder versions this week. C only if A/B felt manageable, at Learn C's fixed dose.

WARM-UP · 6 MINUTES

March for 2 minutes, then spend 1 minute on each practice move; reset and breathe in the time left.

A (and optional C): 5–6 assisted sit-to-stands (01E), 5–6 unloaded hinges (03E), 5 easy wall push-ups (06E), 3–4 very light rows/side (08E).

B: 3–4 shallow split squats/side (02E), 5–6 unloaded hinges (03E), shoulder circles and 3–4 very light seated presses (07E), 3–4 very light rows/side (08E). Rehearse wall push-ups if swapping the press.

LAST WEEK IN REVIEW

Energy / sleep (1–5):

What went well?

What felt hard?

One change for this week:

Week 1 • Session A

Week: 1 Date: _____ Time: 25–35 minutes

Today's goal: Find steady moves.

No.	Illustration	Exercise + 2 cues	Target	Set 1	Set 2	Rest
1		Chair squat • 01C Whole foot down. Touch gently, stand tall.	8–10 Body weight	reps _____ lb _____	reps _____ lb _____	60–75 sec
2		Dumbbell hip hinge • 03C Send hips back. Weights close to legs.	8–10 lb each	reps _____ lb _____	reps _____ lb _____	60–75 sec
3		Wall push-up • 06C Chest toward wall. Body in one long line.	8–10 Body weight	reps _____ lb _____	reps _____ lb _____	60–75 sec
4		Chair-supported row • 08C Elbow toward hip. Keep torso still.	8–10/side lb, one weight	L reps _____ lb _____ R reps _____ lb _____	L reps _____ lb _____ R reps _____ lb _____	60 sec after both sides
5		Farmer standing hold • 09C Stand tall, shoulders relaxed. Keep breathing.	20–25 sec lb each	sec _____ lb _____	sec _____ lb _____	45–60 sec
6		Dead bug heel tap • 11C Lower one heel gently. Keep trunk still.	5–6/side Body weight	L reps _____ lb _____ R reps _____ lb _____	L reps _____ lb _____ R reps _____ lb _____	45 sec after both sides

Rules for progress, easing up and missed weeks: page 22

Notes / changes / next time:

Example 2 • Try the medium weight, then go back

Fictional example—not a testimonial. Mara is in Build. Her row, 08C, appears in both A and B. She starts on her less steady left side and matches it on the right. Her target is 8–12 reps per side.

Week • session	Lb, one weight	Set 1 L / R	Set 2 L / R	Good reps left
5 • B	5	12 / 12	12 / 12	3 each side
6 • A	5	12 / 12	12 / 12	3 each side
6 • B, trial	10	6 / 6	Not done	2 each side
6 • B, back to light	5	Trial was set 1	12 / 12	3 each side

What she decides: Both sets and both sides reach twelve the next two times she does the row. At her next B session, she tries one medium dumbbell, aiming for eight.

After six reps on the left, she thinks only two more good reps remain. Reaching eight would use them up. She stops at six and matches six on the right. The trial did not work at today's effort target.

She sets down the weight, rests after both sides, and uses 5 lb for set 2. She does not add a third set to replace the trial.

Why: A new weight must allow the bottom of the range with 2–3 good reps left. Ten pounds is too big a jump today. She keeps 5 lb at twelve for another week or two before considering a fresh trial. A weight between the two pairs is an option if she has one.

Her note: “No twisting. Light weight for now.” Going back is a useful decision.

CHAPTER 5 EXTRA

Your Milestone Checks

Week 0 • Your starting point

Date: _____

Copy your Chapter 1 sentence. Keep these pages so you can return to it.

My reason: _____

EVERYDAY TASKS

Check tasks that matter to you. Note “easy,” “need a rest,” or “use support.” Keep your usual help. These are daily-life notes, not tests—skip any unsafe task.

[] Carry my usual grocery bags: _____

[] Climb my usual stairs: _____

[] Stand up from my usual chair: _____

[] Get down to the floor and back up, if comfortable: _____

[] My own task: _____

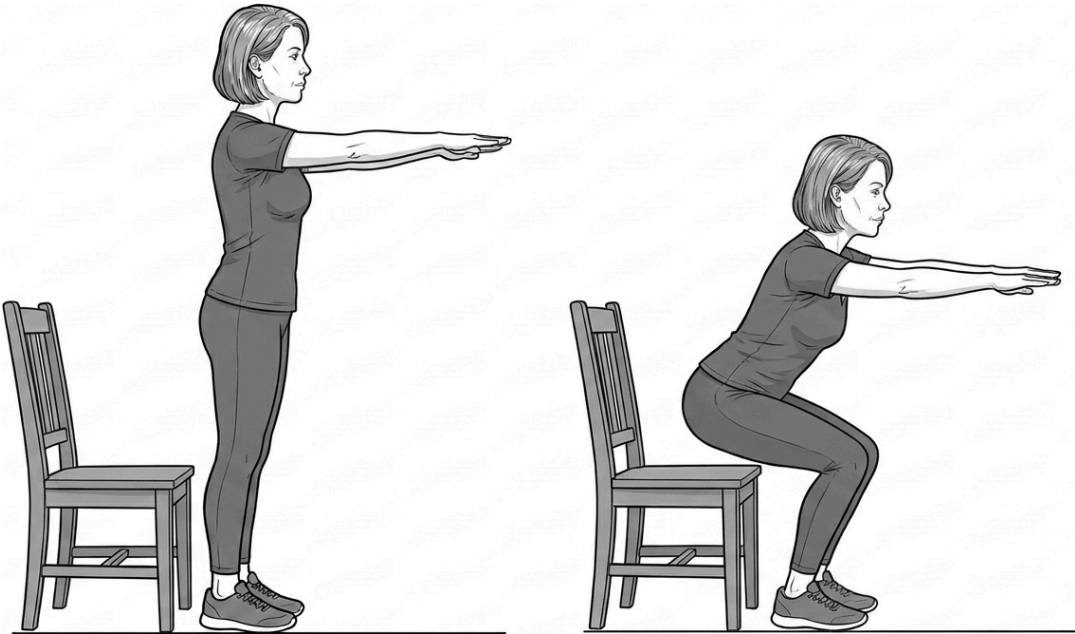
STARTING VERSIONS AND WEIGHTS

Choose from Chapter 6. Fill in untried moves during your first easy A and B. Leave about 4 good reps left, or 5–10 steady seconds in holds. Keep balance support.

Move	Version ID	Lb each / one weight
Chair squat	_____	_____
Split squat or swap	_____	_____
Hip hinge	_____	_____
Bridge or swap	_____	_____
Wall push-up	_____	0
Seated press or swap	_____	_____
Row	_____	_____
Farmer hold	_____	_____
Suitcase hold	_____	_____
Heel tap or swap	_____	_____
Supported balance	_____	0

Use 0 for body weight or no weights. Copy actual reps or seconds and effort from your first cards when you make your Week 4 check.

01. Chair squat



START

FINISH

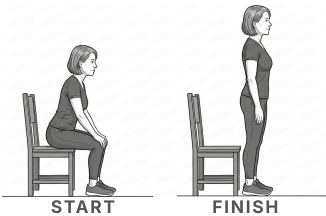
E—01E ASSISTED SIT-TO-STAND

C—01C BODYWEIGHT CHAIR SQUAT

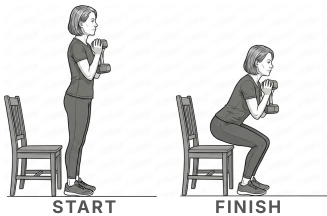
H—01H GOBLET CHAIR SQUAT

Cue 1
Keep your whole foot on the floor.

Cue 2
Barely touch the seat. Then stand tall.



Easier · 01E



Harder · 01H

01. Chair squat

SET UP

Stand just in front of the secured chair, feet a little wider than your hips, toes turned slightly out. Reach your arms forward for balance. Let your knees follow the direction of your toes.

MOVE

- 1 Send your hips back and bend your knees as if to sit.
- 2 Lower until you barely touch the seat, or hover just above it. Keep your legs working rather than sitting down and relaxing.
- 3 Push through your whole foot to stand all the way up.

BREATHE

In on the way down, out as you stand.

Common mistake: Dropping onto the chair or rocking forward to get up. Slow down instead.

Works: Thighs, glutes.

Easier (E)—01E: Start seated near the front of the chair with both feet flat. Lean forward from your hips and stand up, using your hands on your thighs as much as you need. Sit back down slowly for the next rep.

Harder (H)—01H: Hold one suitable dumbbell upright close to your chest, cupping its top end securely with both hands. Keep the same chair height and gentle seat touch when you first add weight.

CHAPTER 8

Chapter 8 • Eating to Support Your Training

No diet. Just five habits that help.

This isn't a diet chapter. There's no calorie target and no list of forbidden foods. Instead, you'll find five simple habits that help your body get the most out of your training—plus recipes, example days, and a shopping list at the end.

1. Eat some protein at every meal.
2. Eat enough food overall.
3. Get your calcium and vitamin D.
4. Fill half your plate with plants.
5. Drink water through the day.

If you have kidney disease, diabetes, a history of disordered eating, or any condition that affects how you eat, talk to your doctor or a registered dietitian before you change your diet.

Habit 1: Protein at every meal

Training gives your muscles a reason to get stronger. Protein gives them the building material.

When researchers combined the results of many studies, adults who added protein while strength training gained a little more strength and muscle. For muscle, the extra benefit leveled off at around 1.6 grams of protein per kilogram of body weight per day.¹³

HOW MUCH?

- The official US recommendation for adults is 0.8 grams per kilogram of body weight per day.¹⁵ That covers the basic needs of nearly all healthy adults.
- Experts on aging recommend 1.0–1.2 g/kg for healthy adults over 65—and more if they're active.¹¹
- Sports nutrition experts suggest 1.4–2.0 g/kg for people who exercise regularly.¹²

Swap it: Swap the chicken breasts for cubed extra-firm tofu to make this a plant-based meal.

ONE-POT GROUND BEEF & MACARONI

A cozy, comforting classic that cooks in a single pot. **Servings:** 4

Ingredients:

- 1 lb (450 g) lean ground beef (93% lean)
- 1 cup (115 g) dry whole wheat macaroni
- 1 can (15 oz, 425 g) diced tomatoes (undrained)
- 2 cups (475 ml) beef broth
- 1/2 cup (55 g) shredded mozzarella cheese

1. Place a large pot over medium-high heat and brown the ground beef until no pink remains.
2. Drain any extra fat from the pot.
3. Pour in the diced tomatoes with their juices, beef broth, and dry macaroni.
4. Bring the mixture to a boil, then turn the heat to low and cover the pot.
5. Simmer for 10 to 12 minutes until the pasta is tender, then stir in the cheese and serve.

Per serving (approx.): protein 30 g · calories 340 · fiber 4 g · calcium 160 mg

Swap it: Swap the ground beef for ground turkey or a meatless ground crumble if you prefer.

Three example days

These are just examples to show how simple foods and the recipes above can fit together—they are not a strict plan. Eat more or less based on your own hunger and energy needs.

EXAMPLE DAY 1 (ABOUT 105 G PROTEIN)

- **Breakfast:** Cottage Cheese & Berry Bowl (34 g protein)
- **Lunch:** Quick Tuna & White Bean Salad (35 g protein)
- **Snack:** 1 large apple sliced with 2 tbsp peanut butter (8 g protein)
- **Dinner:** Sheet-Pan Chicken & Sweet Potatoes (30 g protein)