

A FREE GUIDE

THE STRONG BELIEVER

A Guide to Building Strength and Health

RIYAD BOUARISSA

PART ONE

Why This Matters

In our deen, strength was never treated as some separate, worldly thing that has nothing to do with being a good Muslim. Taking care of your body is part of taking care of your amanah, your trust from Allah.

The Qur'an makes this point directly in the story of Talut (Saul). When the Bani Isra'il questioned why he should be their king, the answer given to them was:

“Allah has chosen him over you and has increased him abundantly in knowledge and physique.”

QUR'AN 2:247

Knowledge and physique, both mentioned as qualities that made him fit to lead. Strength being tied to capability isn't some modern idea being retrofitted onto the deen. It's right there in the Qur'an.

There's also a hadith worth sitting with. Abdullah ibn Amr, radiyallahu anhu, was a young companion who decided to fast every day and pray all night, every night. The Prophet ﷺ corrected him:

“Do not do that. Fast and break your fast, pray and sleep, for your body has a right over you, your eyes have a right over you, and your wife has a right over you.”

SAHIH AL-BUKHARI

Your body has a right over you. Not a suggestion. A right, in the same category as the rights owed to your own wife. Letting yourself run into the ground, or just neglecting your health entirely, isn't humility. It's failing to fulfill something you're obligated to fulfill.

Your body is a trust. You'll be asked what you did with it.

Outside the religious angle, think about your actual week, the one you're already living. You want enough energy to get through a full workday and still have something left when you walk through your front door. You want to get on the floor and play with your kids without your back giving out. You want to carry your own groceries, help a brother move a couch, keep up on a family trip without being the one everyone's waiting on. You want to be present for your wife, not just physically in the room but actually capable and energetic. You want to be someone your community can rely on when it counts.

None of that requires anything extreme. It just requires you to not be weak.

There's a mental health side to this too. Regular training is one of the most consistently effective ways to reduce stress and lift your mood. A hard week feels a lot more manageable when your body isn't falling apart on top of everything else.

A statement from Umar ibn al-Khattab, radiyallahu anhu, is worth mentioning as well. He once saw a man with a large belly who called it "a blessing from Allah." Umar's response: "No, rather it is a punishment." He wasn't talking about a medical condition or something outside someone's control. He was talking about pure neglect.

This guide isn't going to make you into a competitive lifter in four weeks, and that was never the goal. The goal is simple: get you moving, get you stronger, and help you feel more capable, more presentable, and more like yourself. No gimmicks, no confusing jargon, no wasted pages. Just a real plan, explained properly, so you understand why you're doing something instead of blindly following a list.

PART TWO

What You Need to Know Before You Start

Before you touch a single machine, a few basic ideas will make everything in this guide make sense. You don't need to memorize any of this. Just read it once so you understand why the programs are built the way they are.

Reps, Sets, and How to Read the Program

If you've never trained before, some of the words in this guide might not mean much yet. So before anything else, here's the basic vocabulary.

A **rep** (short for repetition) is one complete movement of an exercise, from start to finish. Push a machine handle out and back in once, that's one rep.

A **set** is a group of reps done back to back without stopping to rest. If the program says "3 sets of 10 reps," it means you do 10 reps, rest, do another 10 reps, rest, then do a final 10 reps.

A **working set** is a set that actually counts toward your training, done at real effort. A **warm-up set** is the lighter set you do beforehand to prepare your body. It doesn't count as one of your working sets.

A **rep range**, something like "8 to 12 reps," just means your goal on that set is to land somewhere between those two numbers. You'll see exactly how this works in the Progressive Overload section below.

Muscle Growth Is Simpler Than You Think

When you're completely new to training, your body responds fast. Basic, consistent training will build real strength and real muscle in your first year faster than it ever will again. You don't need a complicated program to take advantage of this. You need to show up and follow the plan.

Why Fewer, Bigger Movements Beat a Long List of Small Ones

This is also why the programs in this guide don't have you doing fifteen different exercises trying to isolate every single muscle from every angle. When you're brand new to training, your body isn't yet good at fully engaging a muscle through small, single-joint movements. Big movements that move real weight across several muscles at once (a press, a pull, a squat pattern) give you far more result for the effort right now. A handful of smaller, single-muscle exercises are still included for areas that need their own direct work, mainly shoulders and arms, but they're a small part of the session, not the main focus.

How Hard Should You Actually Be Pushing?

This is the part beginners usually get wrong. Some people go so light that nothing happens. Others think “working hard” means grinding every rep until they collapse. Here’s the real answer: on your working sets, you should be pushing close to failure, not stopping miles short of it.

So what actually counts as failure? It’s simple. Failure is the point where you can no longer complete another rep with good form. If you have to swing your body or badly cheat the weight up just to keep going, you’ve already hit failure. Stop the set there.

Pain vs. Discomfort

A hard set is supposed to feel uncomfortable. That burning, heavy feeling in the muscle by your last couple of reps is normal, expected, and actually a sign you’re training at the right effort. That’s discomfort, and it’s not something to worry about.

Pain is different, and you need to be able to tell the two apart. Pain is sharp, specific, and shows up in a joint rather than a muscle, your knee, your shoulder, your wrist. If you feel that kind of pain during an exercise, stop the set immediately. Don’t push through it and don’t try to finish your reps anyway. Pain in a joint is your body telling you something is wrong, and training through it is how minor issues turn into injuries that keep you out of the gym for weeks.

To put it simply: a muscle burning is normal. A joint hurting is not.

Progressive Overload: The One Thing That Actually Matters Long Term

If there’s a single idea in this guide worth remembering, it’s this one. Your body only has a reason to get stronger if you keep asking it to do a little more than it’s used to. This is called progressive overload.

Here’s how you’ll apply it. Every exercise in the programs has a rep range, something like “8 to 12 reps.” Pick a weight that lets you land somewhere in that range while still meeting the effort level described above. Each week, try to add a rep or two to your sets. Once you can comfortably hit the top of the range (12, in that example) across all your sets, add a small amount of weight the next session and drop back down to the bottom of the range (8). Then repeat the process.

Add reps, then add weight, then add reps again. That's the whole system. Nothing fancier is needed at this stage.

Warm-Ups

Before your working sets on each exercise, do one lighter warm-up set. Use about half the weight you plan to work with, and do the same number of reps you're planning for your working sets. If your working set is 8 reps, your warm-up set is also 8 reps, just with half the weight. This wakes up the muscle and the joint before you load it properly. You don't need anything more complicated than that.

Rest Between Sets

Aim for somewhere around 2 to 3 minutes of rest between your working sets. Resting longer generally allows for better performance on your next set, but the difference between 2 minutes and 3 minutes is small. You don't need to time this to the second. Just make sure you feel recovered, not just "okay, I guess," before starting your next set.

Give the Program Time

Once you start one of the programs in this guide, stick with it. You don't need to switch things up every few weeks because you're bored or because you saw something different online. As long as you're able to keep adding reps or weight over time, the program is working, even if progress feels slow some weeks. Give it a real run of at least a couple of months before you consider changing anything.

PART THREE

The Programs

Two programs are laid out below. Program A is Full Body, run three times a week. Program B is an Upper/Lower split, run four times a week (Upper, Lower, rest, Upper, Lower, rest, rest). Each session should take around an hour from warm-up to your last set.

Don't forget everything from Part 2: one warm-up set before your working sets on each exercise, push your working sets close to failure, and apply progressive overload week to week.

One more thing before you start. Don't jump straight into the full number of sets shown below. Start every exercise at 1 set in your first week, then add 1 set each week until you reach the number shown in the table, and stay there from then on. So if an exercise lists 3 sets, that's 1 set in week one, 2 sets in week two, and 3 sets from week three onward. If an exercise only lists 1 set to begin with, there's nothing to build up to, just start there. This gives your body time to adapt to a brand new type of stress instead of getting hit with the full amount right away, which is a common way for beginners to end up so sore they can't train again for a week.



Scan for video demonstrations of every exercise in this guide, or [click here](#).

Program A: Full Body

3 days per week · train Day 1, rest, Day 2, rest, Day 3, rest, rest.

DAY 1

EXERCISE	SETS	REPS
Chest Press Machine	3	6–10
Lat Pulldown	2	6–10
Chest-Supported Row Machine	2	6–10
Leg Extension	2	8–12
Seated Hamstring Curl	1	8–12
Cable Triceps Extension	2	8–12
Preacher Curl	1	8–12
Lateral Raise (Cable or DB)	1	8–12
Calf Raise	1	8–12

DAY 2

EXERCISE	SETS	REPS
Stiff-Leg Deadlift (SLDL)	2	5–7
Seated Hamstring Curl	2	8–12
Pec Deck Machine	2	6–10
Lat Pulldown	3	6–10
Chest-Supported Row Machine	2	6–10
Lateral Raise (Cable or DB)	2	8–12
Preacher Curl	1	8–12
Cable Triceps Extension	1	8–12
Calf Raise	1	8–12

DAY 3

EXERCISE	SETS	REPS
Preacher Curl	2	8–12
Cable Triceps Extension	1	8–12
Lateral Raise (Cable or DB)	1	8–12
Incline Press Machine	3	6–10
Lat Pulldown	3	6–10
Chest-Supported Row Machine	2	6–10
Leg Extension	1	8–12
Hack Squat	2	5–7
Calf Raise	1	8–12

Program B: Upper/Lower Split

4 days per week · train Upper, Lower, rest, Upper, Lower, rest, rest.

UPPER DAY 1

EXERCISE	SETS	REPS
Chest Press Machine	3	6–10
Cable Triceps Extension	2	8–12
Lat Pulldown	3	6–10
Chest-Supported Row Machine	3	6–10
Preacher Curl	2	8–12
Lateral Raise (Cable or DB)	2	8–12

UPPER DAY 2

EXERCISE	SETS	REPS
Lat Pulldown	3	6–10
Chest-Supported Row Machine	3	6–10
Preacher Curl	2	8–12
Pec Deck Machine	3	6–10
Cable Triceps Extension	2	8–12
Lateral Raise (Cable or DB)	2	8–12

LOWER DAY 1

EXERCISE	SETS	REPS
Hack Squat	3	5–7
Stiff-Leg Deadlift (SLDL)	3	5–7
Leg Extension	2	8–12
Seated Hamstring Curl	2	8–12
Ab Crunch Machine	2	8–12
Calf Raise	2	8–12

LOWER DAY 2

EXERCISE	SETS	REPS
Stiff-Leg Deadlift (SLDL)	3	5–7
Hack Squat	3	5–7
Seated Hamstring Curl	2	8–12
Leg Extension	2	8–12
Ab Crunch Machine	2	8–12
Calf Raise	2	8–12

PART FOUR

Cardio

Lifting weights builds strength and muscle. It does very little for your heart on its own. Cardiovascular exercise is what protects you from heart disease, keeps your blood pressure in check, and gives you the kind of everyday stamina that lets you keep up with your kids or get through a long day without feeling wiped out. It matters, and it deserves its own place in your week, not just an afterthought.

That said, more isn't automatically better here. If your main goal is building strength and muscle, doing too much cardio, especially hard, high intensity cardio, can eat into your recovery and slow your progress in the gym. The goal is to get the health benefits without working against everything else you're doing.

The Two Types Worth Knowing

Low intensity steady state (LISS) is anything done at a comfortable, sustained pace, a brisk walk, a light jog, cycling at an easy pace. You can hold a conversation while doing it. This is easy to recover from and unlikely to interfere with your lifting.

High intensity interval training (HIIT) is short bursts of hard effort followed by rest, for example a series of 20 to 30 second sprints with a minute or two of easy movement in between. This is more demanding on your body and takes longer to recover from.

A Simple Way to Apply This

For general health, aim for somewhere around 2 to 4 sessions of LISS per week, roughly 20 to 30 minutes each. Walking counts. So does a light jog, cycling, or swimming. If you'd rather track daily movement instead of formal sessions, aiming for something like 8,000 to 10,000 steps a day works just as well.

If you also want to add HIIT, keep it to no more than 1 to 2 sessions a week. It's a useful tool, but it's demanding, and doing too much of it will fight against your recovery from lifting.

Avoid doing cardio, especially anything intense, right before a lifting session. It'll drain the energy you need to train properly. If you want to do both on the same day, do your lifting first, or separate them with a few hours if you can.

One useful trick: an easy walk or light cardio session the day after a lower body training day can actually help you recover faster and feel less sore, rather than just being an extra task on top of everything else.

None of this needs to be complicated. A walk after dinner most nights, or a bike ride a couple of times a week, will do more for your heart and your energy levels than people give it credit for.

PART FIVE

Nutrition

You don't need a meal plan to make real progress. In fact, if a diet plan sounds exhausting to even think about, that's a good sign it's not going to survive contact with real life anyway. Small, consistent changes to how you already eat will take you further than any strict diet ever will. Here are the principles that actually matter.

Protein

Protein is what your body uses to repair and build the muscle you're training. Without enough of it, you won't get nearly as much out of the effort you're putting in at the gym.

You don't need to weigh your food or count grams to get this right. Just make sure a solid source of protein shows up at most of your meals, not just once a day as an afterthought. If your plate right now is mostly rice or bread with a small side of meat, flip that ratio around. More protein, less filler.

Good halal sources include chicken, beef, lamb, fish, eggs, and dairy. Beans and lentils are solid additions too, especially on days you want a break from meat.

Whole Foods Over Processed Foods

Rice, vegetables, fruit, potatoes, whole grains, and similar foods should make up the bulk of what you eat, somewhere around 80 to 90 percent of your plate on a normal day. The other 10 to 20 percent can genuinely be whatever you want, including the things you'd normally think of as off-limits.

There's No Such Thing as a Bad Food

Treating certain foods as forbidden usually backfires. Once something feels off-limits, eating it starts to feel like breaking a rule, and that kind of thinking is exactly what turns one plate of biryani into "well, today's ruined anyway, might as well keep going." A food isn't good or bad on its own, it's just food. Let yourself enjoy it without the guilt attached, and staying consistent gets a lot easier.

Fats and Carbs

You don't need to fear either of these, whatever the latest food fad on your timeline is telling you. Both fuel your training and your daily energy. Favor whole sources where you can (olive oil, nuts, and fatty fish for fats, rice, oats, and fruit for carbs) and you'll naturally end up in a good place without needing to track anything.

Hydration

Drink water throughout the day, not just when you remember to. If you're used to having sugary drinks or juice with most meals, try swapping half of them out for water as a starting point. Being properly hydrated also directly affects how strong and energetic you feel in the gym.

A Few Practical Swaps

A lot of home cooking uses more oil and butter than it needs to. Try cutting the amount you'd normally use by a third and see if you even notice a difference, most dishes hold up fine with less. Where you can, grill, bake, or air-fry instead of deep-frying. Go easy on heavy sauces and dressings too, they add up fast without you realizing it. A squeeze of lemon, some herbs, or a lighter yogurt-based sauce goes a long way.

If You Overeat At One Meal

Just go back to normal at the next one. This is the same idea as the point above, one meal isn't good or bad, it's just a meal. Skipping meals to "make up" for a bigger meal earlier in the day usually backfires and leaves you overly hungry later. Consistency across the week matters far more than any single meal.

None of this requires counting calories or weighing your food. Get your protein in, build most of your meals around whole foods, stay hydrated, and the rest tends to take care of itself.

PART SIX

FAQ

Do I need supplements to see results?

No. Supplements are the last one percent, not the foundation. Training consistently, eating enough protein, and sleeping properly will do more for you than any supplement ever will. If you want one simple addition once the basics are locked in, plain creatine monohydrate (about 5 grams a day) is well studied and safe. It's not required to make progress.

How do I know if I'm using the right weight?

You won't know for certain on your first attempt at a new exercise, and that's fine. Pick a weight, do the set, and check it against the effort guide in Part 2. If you finished comfortably with reps to spare, go heavier next time. If you couldn't keep good form, go lighter. It usually takes a session or two per exercise to find the right weight. Nobody gets this exactly right on the first try.

What if a machine is busy or my gym doesn't have a specific exercise?

Move on to a different exercise and come back to it later if it frees up. Nobody's memorizing which machine you were "supposed" to use, least of all your muscles. If it's genuinely unavailable, swap it for anything that trains the same muscle in a similar way, another chest press variation for a chest press, another row variation for a row. Don't stress over matching the exact exercise listed. Hitting the muscle group matters far more than the specific machine.

Do I need to be sore after every session to know it's working?

No. Soreness isn't a reliable measure of anything, and chasing it is a good way to convince yourself a great workout was a failure just because you can still walk normally the next day. Some people get sore easily and others barely at all, and neither means much on its own. The real sign of progress is whether you're adding reps or weight over time, not how much your legs hurt the next day.

What if I miss a training day?

Just pick back up where you left off at the next session. Missing one day here and there won't undo your progress. What actually derails people is missing weeks or months at a time, not missing a single Tuesday. Don't let one missed session turn into an excuse to quit.

What if I'm sick? Should I still train?

With something minor, a cold or feeling a bit run down, you can usually still train, just ease off and do fewer sets or lighten the effort for that session. With a real illness or fever, take the time off and let your body recover properly. Either way, don't worry about "losing progress." Your strength comes back quickly once you're back to normal, often within the first session or two.

How long until I actually see results?

Most people notice they're getting stronger within the first few weeks, since strength tends to show up before visible changes do. Physical changes take longer and are usually noticeable somewhere in the two to three month range of consistent training. This varies a lot person to person, so don't measure yourself against anyone else's timeline.

Does sleep actually matter for this, or is that overrated?

It matters more than most people give it credit for. Poor sleep makes it harder to recover from training, harder to keep your effort up in the gym, and harder to stick to good habits with food. You don't need to obsess over tracking it. Just make getting a proper night's sleep an actual priority, not whatever's left over after everything else in your day.

Should I train while fasting?

Yes, plenty of people train successfully while fasting. If you can, train closer to iftar when you'll have more energy, and don't be discouraged if your performance dips slightly during those weeks, that's completely normal. Prioritize protein and fluids at suhoor and iftar so your body has what it needs to recover.

This guide will get you moving in the right direction if you actually stick with it. A real plan built around your schedule, your goals, and someone actually checking in with you is a different thing entirely, and it's what most people end up needing to keep going long term.

If that's something you want, you can find me at
riyadbouarissa.com.

Riyad Bouarissa

*May Allah give you strength in your deen and in your body, and make
this a means of good for you and your family.*