

GET STRONGER, LIVE LONGER

Contributed by Heidi Roth, RDN, CHHC

August is National Wellness Month, a great time to focus on our health. While nutrition, sleep, and stress management are all extremely important for wellness, one could argue that one of the most important things to focus on is muscle mass.

It used to be that only bodybuilders and athletes talked about muscle, but these days everyone seems to be talking about it. Researchers and clinicians are now calling muscle the “Organ of Longevity.” Wait... organ? Aren’t organs things like hearts, lungs, kidneys, and pancreases? Yes, but now skeletal muscle is considered to be an organ as well and is, in fact, the largest organ of our body. It accounts for about 40% of our weight.

Not only does muscle power our movements, but it also releases thousands of signaling proteins called myokines. These myokines travel through the bloodstream and communicate with the pancreas, bone, brain, liver, and immune system. Think of them as chemical messengers that contribute in large part to the many benefits of exercise.

While muscle mass is important, big, bulky muscles are not necessarily the goal for most of us. What we really want is quality muscle as well as strength. When we are sedentary, we can end up with muscle that’s marbled with fat, leading to less strength and more inflammation. Healthy skeletal muscle helps to balance our blood sugar levels, increase our energy levels, decrease body fat, boost brain function, and decrease our risks of injury by supporting tendons, ligaments, and joints.

Muscle mass isn’t just about looking good. It’s having the physical capacity to do what we need to do. Strength is what allows us to lift heavy laundry baskets, get up from a chair, rearrange furniture and do our activities of daily living with energy. Strength and function may decline before muscle mass does, making it important to maintain.

Unfortunately, there are many things causing us to lose muscle mass and strength, including age, inactivity, poor diet, GLP-1 use, and menopause. But here’s the good news: it’s not inevitable! With strength training and the right nutrition, research shows we can build up muscle and strength at ANY age, even into our nineties. It’s never too late to start.

Ways to incorporate strength training into your routine

Aim for 2-3 sessions per week that target all the major muscle groups - legs, back, chest, shoulders, arms and core.

Bodyweight exercises also count! Squats, push-ups (modified on your knees or against a wall if you’re starting out), lunges, planks, and burpees are all excellent ways to build strength without equipment.

Resistance bands are inexpensive, travel-friendly, and a great way to add resistance gradually as you build strength. They’re especially gentle on the joints, which makes them a nice option if you’re newer to strength training or coming back after time off.

Free weights, such as dumbbells and kettlebells, are one of the best ways to build practical strength. They require your body to stabilize the weight, which helps improve balance and coordination along with muscle strength. Start with a weight you can lift with good form for about 8-12 repetitions. The last few reps should feel challenging, but not sloppy. As you get stronger, gradually increase the weight, reps, or sets. This gradual challenge is called progressive overload, and it is one of the key principles of building strength.

Weight machines are a great option if you’re newer to the gym, since they guide your body through a controlled, safe range of motion and take some of the guesswork out of proper form. They’re a nice way to build confidence before moving on to free weights.



HIIT (High Intensity Interval Training) combines short bursts of strength and cardio work, making it an efficient way to build muscle and improve cardiovascular fitness at the same time.

Pilates is a great way to build strength without bulking up. Many studios use an apparatus called a reformer, but you can also get a great workout on a mat at home in as little as 10 minutes.

Yoga is for nearly everyone, young or old, in shape or not. It can be whatever you need it to be – a calming, gentle stretch or an intense strength-building workout depending on the poses and the pace.

What we put at the end of our fork is important as well. Focusing on whole real foods, with adequate protein, plenty of fiber, and omega-3 fatty acids can all contribute. Aim for at least 1.0-1.2 grams of protein per kilogram of body weight (many experts suggest that this should be more like 1.6 grams/kilogram) If you weigh around 150 pounds, that would be roughly 70-110 grams of protein per day. Spreading protein across meals, aiming for at least 20-25 grams per meal, is usually more effective than saving it all for dinner.

Lastly, there's a famous quote that applies perfectly: "Don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good." The best type of strength training is the one you will actually do consistently. Start where you are. Don't look for perfection. Add in a quick plank or squat between meetings. Squeeze in some jumping jacks after lunch. It all counts! If you're not sure where to begin, invest in a session or two with a personal trainer to start you off with some safe exercises for your abilities. Your future self thanks you!

MUSHROOM, SPINACH, & FETA BREAKFAST TACOS WITH BRUSCHETTA – SERVES 4

Start your day with tacos that pack a protein punch and keep you full with fiber!

INGREDIENTS:

- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 1 cup sliced mushrooms
- 1 cup baby spinach, packed
- 4 large eggs
- 1 tablespoon nonfat (or nondairy) milk
- ¼ teaspoon dried basil
- ⅛ teaspoon black pepper
- ¼ cup crumbled feta cheese
- 4 six-inch corn tortillas
- 1 cup prepared tomato bruschetta topping

PREPARATION:

1. In a ten-inch skillet, heat the oil over medium heat.
2. Add the mushrooms to the skillet and sauté for 2 to 3 minutes until softened, stirring often.
3. In a small bowl, whisk together the eggs, milk, basil, and pepper and set aside.
4. Add the spinach to skillet and sauté for one minute until wilted.
5. If needed, spray the skillet with cooking spray before adding in the egg mixture. Using a spatula, scramble together the eggs with the veggies. As the eggs set, stir in the feta crumbles, and sauté another minute until the cheese is softened.
6. Assemble the tacos by dividing the egg mixture among tortillas and top with bruschetta topping.

How will you build your strength?



Heidi Roth, RD, LDN is a Registered/Licensed Dietitian, Health Coach and nutrition expert with a passion for health and wellness. She graduated from the University of Pittsburgh with a BS in Nutrition and Dietetics.

