

The 3-Day Strong Start

Three full-body strength sessions, 40 minutes each, that you can do this week with a pair of dumbbells. Built for busy women over 30.

Nell Ashcombe · Strong with Nell

strongwithnell

Welcome

You don’t need a new life. You need three sessions.



Most plans fail because they ask for six days a week, a food diary and a personality transplant. This one asks for three sessions of 40 minutes. That is enough to get noticeably stronger in a month, and it is the same structure I use with every woman I coach.

After 30, adults lose roughly 3–8% of their muscle per decade unless they do something about it. Strength training is the something. It is also the part of fitness most women were told wasn’t for them, which is exactly why it works so well once you start.

Do the three days, write down your weights, and by day three you will already be lifting more than on day one. That is the whole point.

Nell

How to use this guide

1 **Read pages 3 and 4 first.** Five minutes. They tell you how hard to push and how to pick a weight, which matters more than any exercise.

2 **Train on non-consecutive days.** Monday, Wednesday, Friday is the classic. Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday works just as well. Your muscles grow on the days between.

3 **Write every weight down** in the tracker on page 8. Progress you can see is the reason you will still be doing this in month three.

Before you start

What you need, and how hard to push



Two dumbbells

Adjustable is ideal. If you own one pair, a 6–10 kg pair suits most beginners. At a gym, use the rack.



A bench or step

A sturdy chair, the bottom stair or a kitchen counter covers every exercise in this guide.



A timer

Your phone. Rest periods are short on purpose, so time them instead of guessing.

The 5-minute warm-up, every session

2 min	10	10	10	8	1 set
brisk march or walk, arms swinging	bodyweight squats, slow on the way down	hip hinges, hands sliding down thighs	arm circles each way	push-ups against a wall	of your first exercise, light and easy

How hard? Use the RPE scale

RPE stands for rate of perceived exertion, on a scale of 1 to 10. Every exercise in this guide has a target. **RPE 7 means you finish the set feeling you had about three good reps left.** RPE 8 means two left. If you could have done five more, go heavier next set. If you failed a rep or your form broke, go lighter.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
warm-up territory			easy, could talk in sentences			your target: 2–3 reps left		too hard for now	

Picking your first weight. Start lighter than you think for the first set of each exercise. If it feels like RPE 5, add weight for set two. Nobody gets hurt from a first set that was too easy.

Sets, reps and rest. “3 × 8–10” means three sets of 8 to 10 reps. Rest for the time shown before the next set. Rest is part of the training, not a break from it: it is what lets the next set be heavy enough to count.

If you are pregnant, postnatal, have an injury or a medical condition, check with your GP or physio before starting. Stop any exercise that causes sharp pain.

Your week

Three sessions, four rest days

Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun
Day 1 Squat & push	Rest or a walk	Day 2 Lunge & press	Rest or a walk	Day 3 Deadlift & carry	Rest, move a little	Rest

Any three non-consecutive days work. What matters is the gap between sessions, because that is when your muscles repair and get stronger. If life eats a day, shift the session, don't skip it. Two sessions in a week beats zero.

Each session, minute by minute



The finisher is optional. Skip it if you are short on time; never skip the warm-up.

Why full-body, three times a week

Every session trains your whole body: legs, hips, back, chest, shoulders and core. That means each muscle gets worked three times a week, which for a beginner builds strength faster than the "leg day, arm day" split you see on Instagram. It also means a missed session costs you a third of a week, not a whole body part.

2+

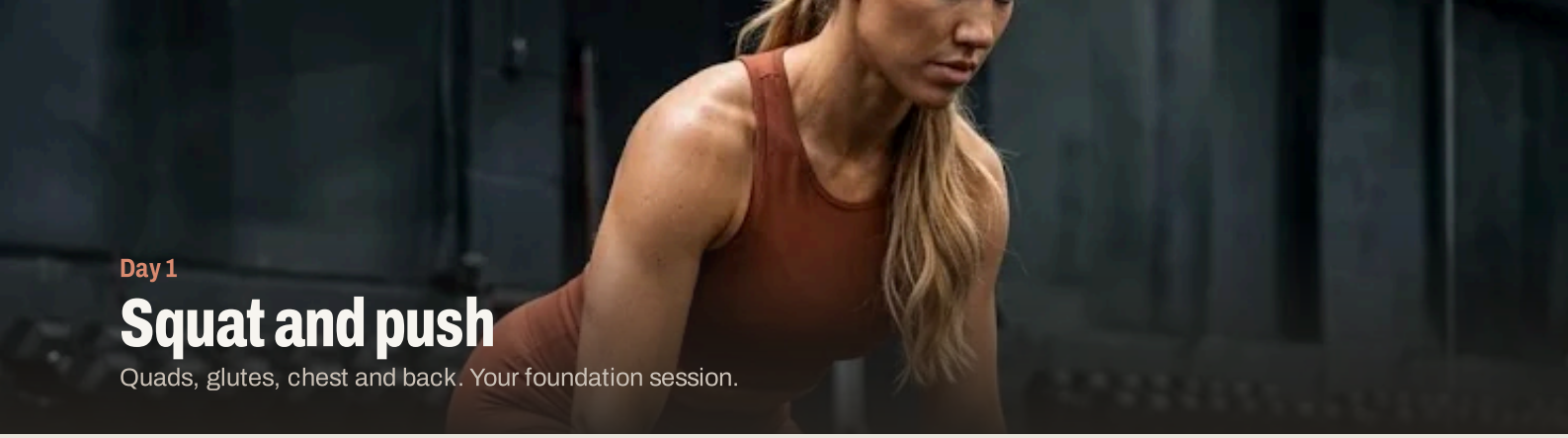
days a week of strengthening activity is the UK Chief Medical Officers' recommendation for every adult

8–12

reps per set is the range where beginners build strength and muscle most reliably

60–90 s

of rest between sets keeps the weights heavy enough to matter without turning it into cardio



Day 1

Squat and push

Quads, glutes, chest and back. Your foundation session.

Warm-up, 5 minutes. Same every day: 2 min brisk march · 10 squats · 10 hip hinges · 10 arm circles each way · 8 wall push-ups · 1 light set of exercise 1.

Goblet squat

3 × 8–10 · RPE 7 · Rest 75 s

- Hold one dumbbell against your chest, elbows pointing down.
- Sit between your heels, not back onto them. Knees track over toes.
- Go as deep as you can keep your heels down and chest up, then drive the floor away.

Easier: squat to a box or bench, or hold a lighter weight

Harder: pause for 2 seconds at the bottom of every rep

Watch for: heels lifting. Widen your stance a little and turn toes slightly out.

Dumbbell Romanian deadlift

3 × 8–10 · RPE 7 · Rest 75 s

- Soft knees, dumbbells against your thighs.
- Push your hips back as far as they go, back flat, until you feel your hamstrings stretch.
- Stand up by squeezing your glutes, not by pulling with your back.

Easier: stop at knee height

Harder: slow 3-second lowering

Watch for: the bar drifting away from your legs. Keep it brushing your thighs and shins.

Incline push-up

3 × 6–10 · RPE 8 · Rest 60 s

- Hands on a bench, step or kitchen counter, shoulder-width apart.
- Body in one straight line from head to heels, glutes tight.
- Lower until your chest touches the edge, elbows at about 45°, then press away.

Easier: use a higher surface (a wall counts)

Harder: use a lower surface, or move to the floor

Watch for: hips sagging. Squeeze your glutes before every rep.

Bent-over dumbbell row

3 × 10 · RPE 7 · Rest 60 s

- Hinge to about 45°, back flat, dumbbells hanging under your shoulders.
- Pull your elbows back past your ribs, pause for one second at the top.
- Lower slowly until your arms are straight.

Easier: support your forehead on a bench

Harder: pause for 2 seconds at the top

Watch for: shrugging. Keep your shoulders away from your ears the whole set.

Plank

3 × 20–40 s · RPE 8 · Rest 45 s

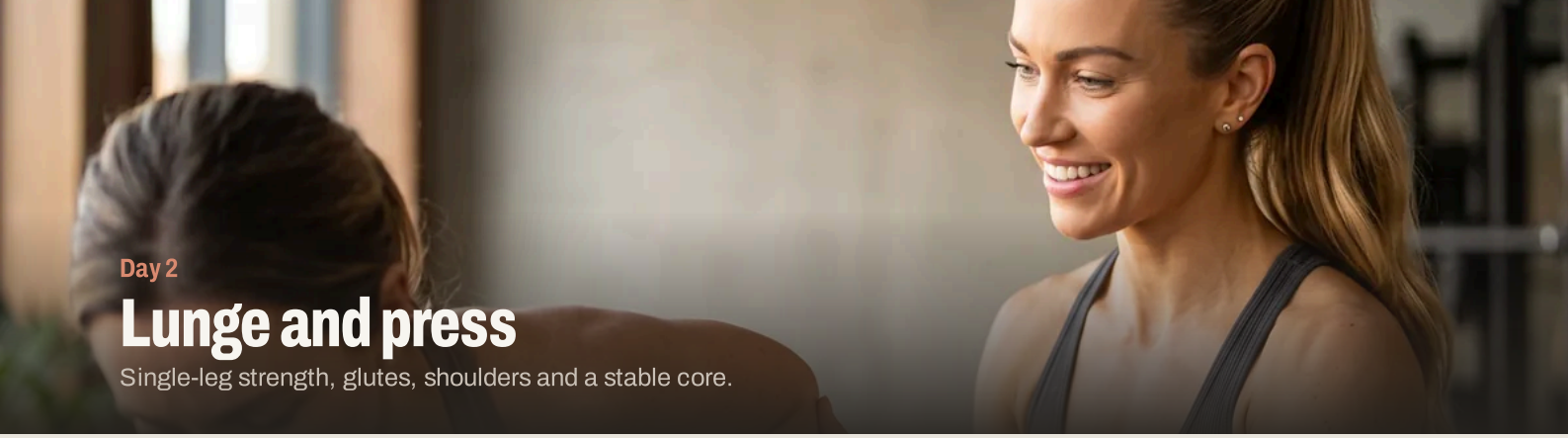
- Forearms on the floor, elbows under shoulders.
- Squeeze your glutes and push the floor away so your upper back rounds slightly.
- Breathe. If you have to hold your breath, the set is over.

Easier: knees on the floor

Harder: lift one foot off the floor for half the time

Watch for: hips high or sagging. Someone should be able to rest a broom along your back.

Optional finisher, 3 minutes: 10 squats, 8 incline push-ups, 20-second plank. Repeat without resting until the timer ends.



Day 2

Lunge and press

Single-leg strength, glutes, shoulders and a stable core.

Warm-up, 5 minutes. Same every day: 2 min brisk march · 10 squats · 10 hip hinges · 10 arm circles each way · 8 wall push-ups · 1 light set of exercise 1.

Dumbbell reverse lunge

3 × 8 per leg · RPE 7 · Rest 75 s

- Dumbbells by your sides, step one foot back and lower the back knee towards the floor.
- Front shin stays roughly vertical, most of your weight on the front heel.
- Push through the front foot to stand. Do all reps on one side, then switch.

Easier: no weights, hand on a wall for balance

Harder: hold the bottom position for 2 seconds

Watch for: front knee caving inwards. Push it gently out over your little toe.

Glute bridge with dumbbell

3 × 12 · RPE 7 · Rest 60 s

- Lie on your back, knees bent, feet flat and hip-width apart. Dumbbell across your hips.
- Push through your heels and lift your hips until your body is straight from shoulders to knees.
- Squeeze your glutes hard at the top for one second, then lower with control.

Easier: no dumbbell

Harder: one leg at a time, no weight

Watch for: arching your lower back at the top. Stop when your hips are level, tuck your ribs down.

Dumbbell overhead press

3 × 8–10 · RPE 7 · Rest 75 s

- Dumbbells at shoulder height, palms facing forwards or slightly in.
- Squeeze your glutes, ribs down, press straight up until your arms are locked out.
- Lower slowly to your shoulders.

Easier: sit on a bench with back support

Harder: pause at the top for 2 seconds

Watch for: leaning back. If your lower back arches, the weight is too heavy today.

Single-arm dumbbell row

3 × 10 per arm · RPE 7 · Rest 60 s

- One hand and one knee on a bench, back flat like a table.
- Pull the dumbbell towards your hip, elbow close to your body.
- Pause at the top, lower until your arm is fully straight.

Easier: lighter weight, higher reps

Harder: pause for 2 seconds at the top

Watch for: twisting your torso to lift the weight. Your shoulders stay square to the floor.

Dead bug

3 × 8 per side · RPE 7 · Rest 45 s

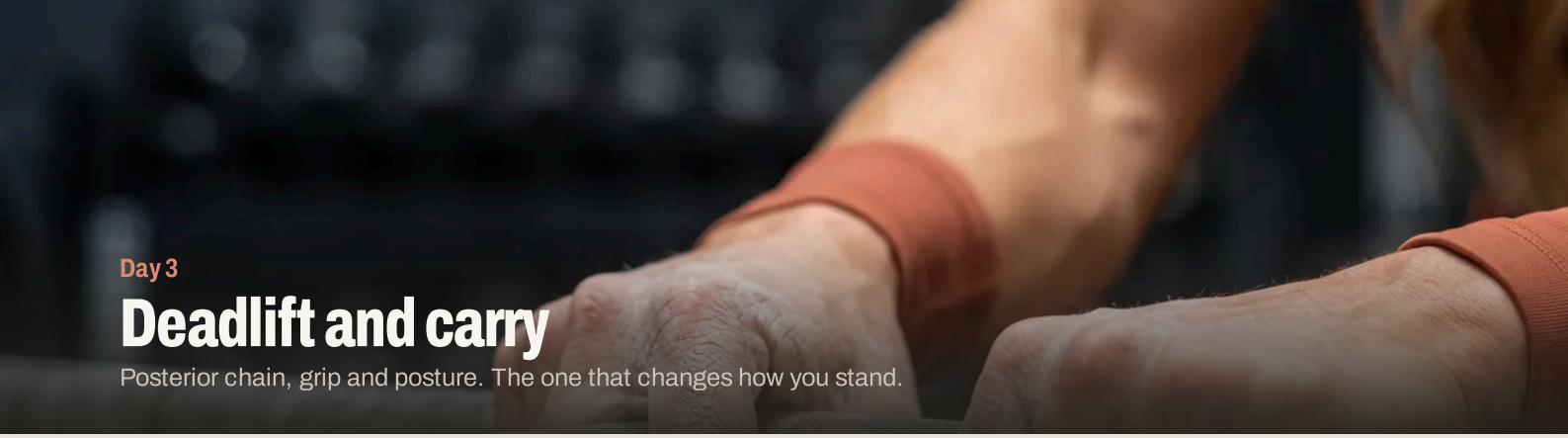
- Lie on your back, arms straight up, knees over hips at 90°.
- Press your lower back into the floor. Slowly lower one arm and the opposite leg towards the floor.
- Return, then switch sides. Move slowly; the slower, the better.

Easier: move only the legs, keep arms up

Harder: hold a light dumbbell in each hand

Watch for: lower back lifting off the floor. Shorten the range until it stays down.

Optional finisher, 3 minutes: 10 reverse lunges per leg, 10 glute bridges, 8 overhead presses. Repeat until the timer ends.



Day 3

Deadlift and carry

Posterior chain, grip and posture. The one that changes how you stand.

Warm-up, 5 minutes. Same every day: 2 min brisk march · 10 squats · 10 hip hinges · 10 arm circles each way · 8 wall push-ups · 1 light set of exercise 1.



Dumbbell deadlift

3 × 8 · RPE 7 · Rest 90 s

- Dumbbells on the floor outside your feet, feet hip-width apart.
- Hinge and bend your knees until you can grip them with a flat back, shoulders over the weights.
- Stand up in one movement, pushing the floor away. Lower the same way.

Easier: start from blocks or a low step

Harder: slow 3-second lowering

Watch for: rounding your back. If you can't reach the floor with a flat back, raise the dumbbells on a step.



Step-up

3 × 8 per leg · RPE 7 · Rest 75 s

- Use a step or bench around knee height. Whole foot on the step.
- Drive through the top foot to stand up, without pushing off the bottom foot.
- Lower slowly, touching the floor lightly with the bottom foot.

Easier: lower step

Harder: hold dumbbells by your sides

Watch for: pushing off the back foot. Point the toes of that foot up so it can't help.



Dumbbell floor press

3 × 8–10 · RPE 7 · Rest 75 s

- Lie on your back, knees bent, dumbbells over your chest with elbows at about 45°.
- Lower until your upper arms touch the floor, pause for one second.
- Press back up and squeeze your chest at the top.

Easier: lighter weight

Harder: pause for 2 seconds on the floor

Watch for: bouncing off the floor. The touch is gentle and the pause is real.



Farmer's carry

3 × 30 m (or 40 s) · RPE 7 · Rest 75 s

- Pick up the heaviest dumbbells you can hold with good posture.
- Walk tall: ribs down, shoulders back, eyes forward, small quick steps.
- Set them down with a hinge, not a bend.

Easier: one dumbbell in one hand, switch halfway

Harder: heavier dumbbells or a longer walk

Watch for: leaning to one side. Imagine a glass of water balanced on your head.



Side plank

3 × 20 s per side · RPE 8 · Rest 45 s

- Elbow under your shoulder, feet stacked or staggered.
- Lift your hips until your body is a straight line from head to feet.
- Breathe steadily, keep the top hip stacked over the bottom one.

Easier: knees on the floor

Harder: lift the top leg

Watch for: hips dropping. Push the floor away with your forearm and squeeze your glutes.

Optional finisher, 3 minutes: 8 dumbbell deadlifts, 20-metre farmer's carry, 15-second side plank each side. Repeat until the timer ends.

Getting stronger

The only progression rule you need

It is called double progression, and it is how every woman I coach goes from a 6 kg goblet squat to a 24 kg one.

1

Pick a weight

that lands you at the bottom of the rep range, around RPE 7.

2

Add reps

each session until you hit the top of the range on all sets.

3

Add weight

by about 5–10% (the next dumbbell up) and drop back to the bottom of the range.

4

Repeat

for months. Small jumps, written down, beat big jumps you can't sustain.

Your tracker

Write the weight and reps for each set, e.g. "8 kg × 10". Print this page or copy the table into your notes.

Exercise	Set 1	Set 2	Set 3	Next time
Day 1				
Goblet squat				
Romanian deadlift				
Incline push-up				
Bent-over row				
Plank (seconds)				
Day 2				
Reverse lunge				
Glute bridge				
Overhead press				
Single-arm row				
Dead bug (reps)				
Day 3				
Dumbbell deadlift				
Step-up				
Floor press				
Farmer's carry (kg / m)				
Side plank (seconds)				

Eat and recover

Three numbers, no diet

You will not be given a meal plan, because you would stop following it by Thursday. You get three targets. Hit them most days and the training does the rest.

1.6 g

protein per kg of bodyweight, per day

For a 70 kg woman that is about 110 g. Research on people who lift consistently points to this as the level that supports building muscle. Spread it over three or four meals: eggs, Greek yoghurt, chicken, fish, tofu, lentils, cottage cheese.

7–9 h

of sleep

This is where the muscle actually gets built. One bad night is fine. A week of five-hour nights will flatten your progress faster than any missed session.

0

banned foods

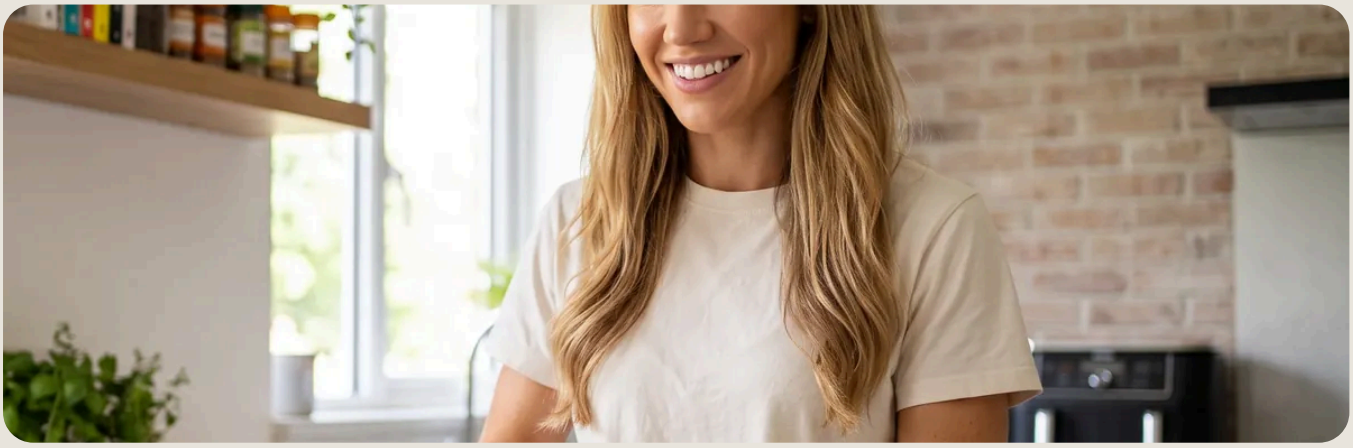
Nothing is off the list. Add the protein in first and eat what you like around it. Women who train hard and eat enough end up leaner than women who train hard and eat less. Every time.

What to expect in the first week

Soreness. Expect it 24–72 hours after each session, especially the first two. It is normal, it fades within two weeks of consistent training, and a walk helps more than a rest day on the sofa.

Scale weight. May go up slightly at first because your muscles hold more water when they start training. Ignore it for the first month and judge by the tracker and how your clothes fit.

Hunger. You will be hungrier. That is the signal working, not a problem to fix. Answer it with protein.



What's next

You've done the first three. Here are the next twelve weeks.

Repeat this 3-day cycle for two or three weeks, adding weight as the tracker tells you. Then pick one of these.

Strong in 12

The full 12-week programme: 36 sessions, gym and home versions, a video for every exercise and a tracker that shows your weights going up. The same structure my 1:1 clients follow, in a plan you run yourself.

£39

One payment, yours to keep.

Get Strong in 12

1:1 online coaching

A programme written for your body, your kit and your calendar. Video feedback on your lifts, a weekly check-in and me in your pocket on weekdays. Limited places, by application.

£189 a month

Three-month minimum.

Apply for coaching

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This guide is general fitness information and not medical advice. Consult your GP or a physiotherapist before starting a new exercise programme if you are pregnant, postnatal, injured, or have a medical condition. Stop any exercise that causes pain.

Sources: UK Chief Medical Officers' Physical Activity Guidelines (2019); Morton et al., British Journal of Sports Medicine (2018) on protein intake and resistance training; Volpi et al. (2004) on age-related muscle loss.

Concept demo. Nell Ashcombe is a fictional coach and the photographs are AI-generated. Website, funnel and this guide by Funnelado, funnelado.com.