



# Training for Strength, Muscle, and Health: A Practical Training Guide for Women

DR. MED. SHEN ZHONG  
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**ABSTRACT**— If you aim to grow strength, build muscle, and stay healthy long term, training is definitely a biological stimulus that shapes muscle tissue, the nervous system, metabolic health, and hormonal resilience. The most effective training strategy integrates resistance training as the primary driver of adaptation, with cardio used strategically to support cardiovascular health and recovery. The principles below are grounded in contemporary resistance-training and exercise-physiology research.

## I. RESISTANCE TRAINING: THE PRIMARY DRIVER OF STRENGTH AND MUSCLE

Resistance training is the most effective stimulus for increasing muscle mass, maximal strength, bone density, and long-term metabolic health in women [1-2]. Lifting weights challenges muscles and connective tissue. In response, the body adapts by rebuilding stronger muscle fibers and improving how efficiently they work. This adaptation is driven primarily by mechanical tension applied progressively over time.

## II. HOW MECHANICAL TENSION, LOAD, AND CONSISTENCY DRIVE RESULTS

At the core of strength and muscle development is **mechanical tension**, which is the force experienced by muscle fibers when they contract against resistance through a controlled range of motion. Contemporary research across multiple groups consistently identifies mechanical tension as the primary stimulus for both strength and muscle adaptation [3-5]. Mechanical tension can be produced by lifting heavier weights, or by lifting moderate weights with sufficient effort and control. What matters is not just the load itself, but the effective tension placed on the muscle fibers during training [4-5].

Two additional factors may contribute to muscle growth:

- **Metabolic stress**, which results from sustained muscular effort and fatigue
- **Muscle damage**, which may occur when training includes unfamiliar movements or higher volumes

However, recent research suggests that these factors are supportive rather than primary. Muscle damage is no longer considered a necessary driver of hypertrophy, and excessive damage may even impair training quality and recovery [5-6]. When total training volume is similar, evidence shows that heavier loads produce greater gains in maximal strength, while muscle hypertrophy can be achieved across a wide range of loads, provided that training is performed with sufficient effort [7]. This distinction exists because strength gains depend strongly on neural adaptations, such as improved motor-unit recruitment and coordination, whereas muscle growth depends more on repeated exposure to sufficient tension over time [8-9].

Consistency connects all of these elements. Training muscles 2–3 times per week, distributing work across sessions, allows mechanical tension to accumulate while supporting recovery and long-term progress [3, 8].

*A. What this means in practice:*

- Prioritize exercises and loads that create **meaningful mechanical tension**
- Combine heavier and moderate loads lifted with control
- Train close to muscular fatigue without sacrificing technique
- Choose a structure you can repeat week after week

*B. Weekly training volume (Working sets):*

Working sets are sets performed with meaningful effort (not warm-ups). General guideline per muscle group:

- 8-15 working sets per week — most women can progress well here
- Up to ~20 sets per week — for advanced trainees with good recovery

More is not always better. Volume should increase only if recovery, performance, and motivation remain stable.

- Beginner: 6-10 sets/week
- Intermediate: 10-15 sets/week
- Advanced: 12-20 sets/week (carefully)

*C. Load and repetition range*

A wide range of loads can stimulate hypertrophy when sets are taken close to muscular failure (PMID: 29564973). However:

- Heavier loads ( $\geq 70\%$  1RM) are particularly important for maximal strength development.
- Moderate rep ranges (6–12 reps) offer an efficient balance between tension and volume.

Effective ranges:

- Strength-focused: 3–6 reps (heavier loads)
- Mixed strength & muscle: 6–12 reps (most efficient range)
- Muscle & volume work: 12–20 reps (lighter loads, high effort)

Muscle growth can occur across all of these ranges as long as sets are taken close to failure. (If you could do more than 3–4 extra reps, the set was probably too easy).

*D. Training frequency*

Training a muscle 2–3 times per week generally produces superior hypertrophy compared to once-weekly training, when volume is equated.

## III. CARDIO TRAINING: SUPPORTIVE, NOT COMPETITIVE

Cardio training improves cardiovascular health, aerobic capacity, and metabolic function [10]. However, when cardio volume or intensity is excessive, it can interfere with strength and muscle gains—an effect known as the interference effect [11]. Low- to moderate-intensity cardio (Zone 2) supports recovery and overall health while minimizing interference with resistance training adaptations [12].

*How to integrate cardio without compromising muscle*

- Use cardio to support recovery and heart health
- Keep it complementary, not exhausting
- Avoid using cardio as punishment or compensation for eating
- 2–3 sessions per week of Zone 2 cardio (20–40 min)
- HIIT used sparingly, depending on recovery and training phase

## IV. RECOVERY IS WHERE PROGRESS HAPPENS

Training provides the stimulus. Adaptation happens during recovery. Insufficient recovery can blunt strength gains, increase injury risk, and elevate stress hormones [13]. For women, recovery is particularly important. Low energy availability combined with high training stress increases the risk of hormonal disruption and impaired performance [14]. Good training plans respect recovery instead of fighting it.

## V. THE ATOP STUDIO TRAINING PHILOSOPHY

Effective training is not maximal effort every day, it is strategic stress applied consistently over time. A sustainable training structure:

- Resistance training as the foundation (3–5 sessions/week)
- Cardio used to support health and recovery, not replace strength work
- Progressive overload with respect for recovery
- Recovery built into the plan
- Flexibility for real life

*"Strength is not built by doing more and more.  
It is built by doing the right amount, repeatedly, over time."*

Dr. med. Shen Zhong

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