



III

Guides

Progressive Overload Made Simple

Build strength, break
plateaus, and train with
purpose.

Welcome to your progressive overload guide!

Welcome to your guide to progressive overload — one of the most important (and most misunderstood) parts of gym training.

If you've ever felt like you're "just going through the motions" with your workouts or wondering why the same plan stopped working — this is for you. Progressive overload is the key to seeing long-term results, building strength, and feeling genuinely proud of the work you're putting in.

You don't need to be smashing PBs every week. This guide will show you simple, smart ways to challenge yourself — whether that's adding a kilo, squeezing out one more rep, or lifting with better control.

And a quick but important reminder: **if your form goes, it doesn't count**. Progress only works if you're moving well. If you increase your weights but lose control, it's not a step forward — so stay sharp and honest with how each rep feels.

Let's break it down and help you train with purpose.

Briony

The Holistic Health PT



What is Progressive Overload?

Progressive overload is the key to getting stronger, building muscle, and making sure your time in the gym actually pays off. It means gradually asking your body to do a little bit more — whether that's lifting heavier, doing more reps, adding another set, or even just moving with better control.

If you don't keep challenging your muscles, they'll stop adapting. You don't need to overhaul your plan every week — just a small step forward, consistently.

Method 1: Straight Sets

This is the most straightforward way to train — and one of the most effective.

What it is:

You perform multiple sets of the same exercise, usually at the same weight, within a set rep range (like 6–10 reps). It keeps things simple and lets you focus on your form and consistency.

Why it works:

Straight sets help you build strength in a clear, trackable way. You can repeat the same exercise week to week and visibly see your improvements — either within the session or across weeks.

Example:

Say you're doing 4 sets of dumbbell bench press in a 6–10 rep range.

Set 1: 12kg for 10 reps — feels solid

Set 2: Increase to 14kg and manage 8 reps — great

Set 3: Stick with 14kg and hit 7 reps

Set 4: 14kg for 6 reps — near your limit, perfect

Next time, you'd start with 14kg and try to add a rep somewhere. Even one rep more across four sets is real progress. Once you reach 10 reps again, increase the weight slightly and restart the process.

Other Ways to Progress (Not Just Weight):

- Tempo: Slowing down your reps (especially the lowering phase) adds difficulty without needing heavier weights.
- Form: Cleaner reps with better technique are a form of progress.
- Range of Motion: Going deeper or using more control increases stimulus.
- Rest Periods: Slightly reducing rest can increase intensity and overall challenge.

Progressive overload isn't always about chasing the heaviest dumbbell — it's about doing more, or doing better, over time.



Method 2: Drop Sets

A simple but effective way to push intensity and get more from your workout — especially when time is tight.

What it is:

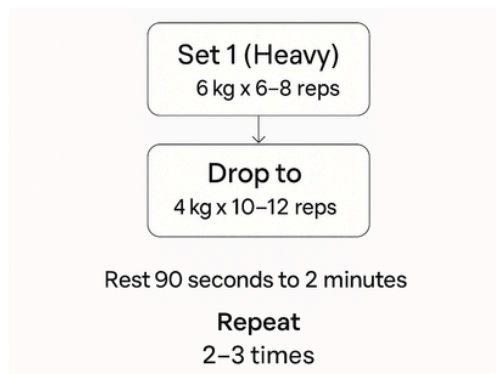
A drop set is a two-part superset using the same exercise. You start with a heavier set for lower reps, then immediately reduce the weight and go again with a lighter set for higher reps — no rest in between.

It's one extended set made up of two parts:

Heavier set (lower reps)

Lighter set (higher reps)

You'll often do 2–3 drop sets per exercise, resting briefly between each one.



Why it works:

Drop sets push your muscles past fatigue and let you increase volume without extra time. You get two challenges in one set — strength in the first half, control and endurance in the second.

Example – Dumbbell Lateral Raise (Drop Set Superset):

Set 1:

6kg x 8 reps (heavy, close to failure — lead with your elbows and don't swing!)

Drop to 4kg x 12 reps (still controlled, no momentum — form first)

You hit the top of both rep ranges and it feels manageable — so for Set 2, you increase:

Set 2:

7kg x 7 reps

5kg x 11 reps

Still feeling strong?

Set 3:

7kg x 6 reps

5kg x 10 reps

NOTE: Even though the reps have dropped you are might still lift a greater max weight:

Set 1: 96kg

Set 2: 104kg

Set 3: 92kg

Remember as you get fatigued your strength will go down.



Method 2: Drop Sets

You're working within the rep range — 6–8 for the heavy part, 10–12 for the lighter part. Once you hit the top of the range with control, increase the weight slightly and work back up again.

Next time you do this programme card, start with the heavier weights you finished on last time — and keep building from there.

What Progress Looks Like:

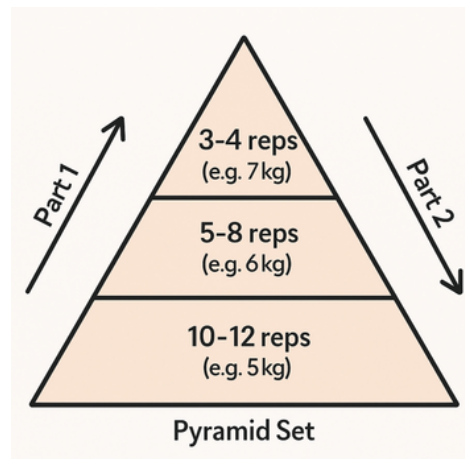
- Adding a rep at the same weight
- Increasing weight and holding rep range
- Stronger form and better control mid-session

Method 3: Pyramid Sets

A structured way to challenge your muscles across multiple intensities — strength, control, and endurance — all in one extended set.

What it is:

A pyramid set is one large superset made up of multiple weight and rep changes performed back-to-back. You'll usually do two pyramid sets per exercise, resting between them.



Each full pyramid includes:

Three ascending stages (light to heavy, high to low reps)

Short rest

Three descending stages (heavy to light, low to high reps)

It looks like this:

1. Light weight – 10–12 reps
2. Moderate weight – 5–8 reps
3. Heavy weight – 3–4 reps

Rest

1. Heavy weight – 3–4 reps
2. Moderate weight – 5–8 reps
3. Light weight – 10–12 reps

All of that = one pyramid set

Method 3: Pyramid Sets

Example – Dumbbell Shoulder Press (Pyramid Superset):

Set 1 – Full Pyramid:

1.5kg x 12 reps

2.6kg x 8 reps

3.7kg x 4 reps

(Rest)

1.7kg x 4 reps

2.6kg x 8 reps

3.5kg x 12 reps

Set 2 – Full Pyramid:

1.6kg x 10 reps

2.7kg x 6 reps

3.8kg x 3 reps

(Rest)

1.8kg x 3 reps

2.7kg x 6 reps

3.6kg x 10 reps

NOTE: The first time you do this, your overall weight lifted might decrease, but in time it'll push forwards again!

Set 1: 272kg

Set 2: 252kg

You're still working within your rep targets — and once you reach the top of a range with control, you increase the weight slightly and start building up again.

Next time you do this programme card, start with the heavier weights you finished on last time — and keep progressing from there.

What Progress Looks Like:

- More reps at the same weight
- Increased weight while staying in range
- Full pyramid completed with better control and strength



That's it — you're now clued up on three powerful ways to progress in the gym: **straight sets**, **drop sets**, and **pyramid sets**.

Remember, results don't come from doing more for the sake of it — they come from doing a **little better**, over and over again. That might be lifting heavier, but it might also be moving with more control, resting less, or tightening up your form.

And one last reminder: **if your form goes, it doesn't count**. Progress only matters when you're in control. Every increase — whether it's weight, reps, or tempo — should feel earned, not rushed.

Use this guide alongside your programme cards, keep checking in with how your sets feel, and don't be afraid to ask for help if you need it.

Let's keep building.

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