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#Gains, Explained: Do I Really Have to Go to the Gym?

The commute sucks, I don't like lines for the squat rack, and it doesn't suit my schedule. Can I stay fit at home?



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Do you wonder what the best way is to count sets and reps? Why you shouldn't skip leg day? We have answers. This is #Gains, Explained, a space for you to ask any and every question about fitness. The Men's Health team (and other experts) are here for you.

To submit a question for a future column, fill out [this form](#).

#GAINS EXPLAINED

Wondering how you guys feel about working out from home? I've found ever since Covid I'm able to better schedule and focus my workouts without all the driving to the gym, parking, waiting for machines/equipment and getting back home. I work long and sporadic hours during the week, so I may be an outlier here, but is there any research on better gains/overall health when working out at home or is it more detrimental than going to a gym?

-The At-Home Squatter

FOR LOTS OF guys, fitness and exercise are inherently associated with a specific setting. A gym has traditionally served as this essential 'third place'; a venue dedicated strictly to physical activity without the distractions and comforts of home, filled with lots of heavy equipment and a like-minded community. Up until 2020, most people maintained a hard line between the gym and the home, only making space and time to sweat in their living rooms when there was no other option.

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That changed when gyms closed in 2020 during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic. And while many dedicated exercisers rejoiced when they were able to return to their favorite fitness centers, not everyone was ready to go back. From the question above, it sounds like you're in that latter group—and for the most part, I am too. I'm most comfortable exercising at home, and the bulk of my workouts take place in my backyard. Whether you're sick of the commute, done with waiting in long lines to work in on the squat rack, or if you're genuinely not comfortable around groups of people sweating and breathing heavily in an indoor space—Covid-19 is still very prevalent, and the risk of contraction might not be something you're willing to risk—that's okay. I find myself discouraged from committing to a full gym routine for all of these reasons.

Going against the predominant way fitness is practiced can feel nerve-racking, but I'm here to tell you: If working out at home is your preference, there's no reason to force yourself to go to a gym. We don't have enough data to declare that home workouts or gym workouts are more effective, partly because the distinction between the two types of venues varies widely from person to person. What are your goals, and what type of equipment and space do you have? If you're trying to build muscle like a bodybuilder doing home workouts with only your bodyweight on a yoga mat in your living room, you're going to have a hard time. But if you're focused on more general fitness goals and you have access to more than just a good set of dumbbells, you'll be in a good position to be successful. High-level fitness trainers like [Marcus Filly](#) and [Don Saladino](#) work out at home, and no one is going to accuse them of slacking off on their routines.

The main factor you need to consider is whether your home fitness plan is one that you can maintain. Consistency is key above all else.

“Removing barriers will definitely help you consistently work out,” says [Dr. Rachel Hershenberg, Ph.D. ABPP](#), a licensed clinical psychologist, Emory University professor, and author of [Activating Happiness](#). “If you find that your body feels good, you are looking forward to the at-home workouts, and you continue to meet your weekly frequency goals of how often to work out, then these are great signals that your new habit is working.”

Men's Health fitness director [Ebenezer Samuel, C.S.C.S.](#) agrees. “Training from home removes a ton of barriers and bits of friction: Less headache

over commute, less headache over waiting for gear, and less headache over wardrobe and the race to the post-workout meal,” he says. And don’t underestimate how much of a factor just getting to the gym can be. “That commute aspect is key too: Proximity to a gym is a key factor in adherence, per IHRSA research: 70 to 80 percent of gym-goers live within a 12-minute home or office commute from their gym,” he notes. “If you go to a gym, you do want it close.”

We also know that the best workout for you will be the one you like doing. If you dread every aspect of your trip to the gym, you’re not going to have a good time, and you’ll have an even harder time sticking with your training plan. You’ll be better off at home without those stressors, even if it means that you don’t have access to every piece of equipment imaginable. The extra effort you’ll be able to dedicate to a workout you enjoy will be worth it.

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As you progress in your fitness journey, however, you might find that your home workouts won’t be able to serve every single purpose. Your goals will evolve. If you’re not in the position to build out the equivalent of a commercial gym in your house, with heavy equipment and specialized machines, you’ll need to find a place where you can access those big weights and some strong friends to make sure you’re safe. “If you’re trying to meet a powerlifting goal, it makes sense to have more load and other people around to spot you,” notes Samuel. Similarly, you don’t want to mess around with home-rigged equipment and turn into a #fitnessfail. Take my word for it.

The best option for you might be a hybrid routine, with some days in a gym to access the equipment and community you need, and the rest in the comfort of your home. If you can afford the flexibility, take it. But most importantly, stop thinking about this as a binary decision. Fitness and exercise should not be limited to one specific setting. The key is knowing what you need, and being honest with yourself about what you’re willing to put up with to accomplish your goals. This is the current model I use—I do most of my workouts in my yard, but on days of the week dedicated to heavy lifting, I opt to go to a gym so that I can finish my workout more safely. I go during non-peak hours to avoid the rush, so it’s not always convenient, but I feel better knowing that I made that choice because it was best for me.

Overall, your plan should be more about what you’ve found works for

you, not just what appears to be the norm for everyone else. “Having the knowledge and space to train at home untethers you from the gym, and really, that’s as it should be, because fitness can and should be done anywhere, not just in the gym,” says Samuel.

How to Make Your Home Workout Space Work for You

If you are deciding to make your home your dedicated workout space, here are a few tips to make the experience even better.

Separate Your Space

While one of the perks of a home gym is that you don’t have to travel to train, your brain could probably benefit from some separation between your living room and your workout space. Your loved ones will also probably appreciate it if your floor isn’t covered in weights, too. Whether this means that you have a dedicated corner of the house where your gear lives or a separate room entirely dedicated to fitness, you should make the demarcation clear.

Communicate Your Boundaries

One of the great things about the gym is that everyone knows what you’re there to do. When you’re at home, that line blurs. Whether you live with roommates, a partner, or a whole family, make sure that everyone else in the house knows that your workout time isn’t to be interrupted. That might mean making a schedule, if your workout space is in a common area, or just making it clear when it’s time to exercise.

Invest in the Right Gear for You

Not everyone is going to love the latest, greatest fitness trend—and if you know that’s not you, there’s no reason to splurge on the hot new connected cardio rig. Think about what types of workouts you want to do, then build out your home gym arsenal from there. Check out [some of our top picks to start](#). Another tip: always make sure your space can handle your gear. Measure your ceilings, consider your flooring, and take account how you’ll need to store your weights before you make any purchases.

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