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Men's Fitness

HOME
WORKOUT
AWARDS
2023

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winning products

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- ✓ Rowers
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MYTH BUSTER

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don't always indicate
a good workout

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The more variation you have in your fitness routine, the more sustainable it will be, and Fitness Superstore – the UK's no.1 fitness equipment retailer – stock everything you need to create a home training programme you can stick to. We're talking cardio favourites like treadmills, exercise bikes and rowing machines, to strength staples including dumbbells, barbells, power racks and more, all from leading worldwide brands.

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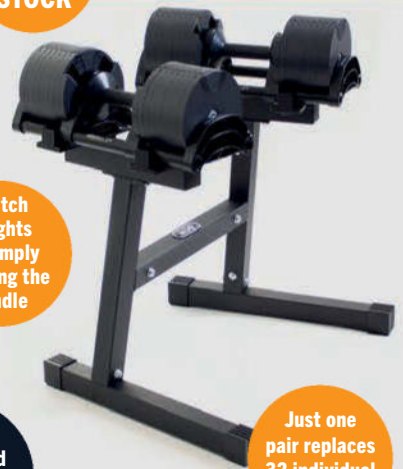
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EDITORIAL

Editor Isaac Williams

Art Director Xavier Robleda

Editorial postal address:

Kelsey Publishing Ltd, The Granary, Downs Court, Yalding Hill, Yalding, Kent, ME18 6AL

ADVERTISING SALES

KELSEY MEDIA

Commercial Manager Ben Rayment

01959 543517

ben.rayment@kelsey.co.uk

Ad Production Supervisor Gracie Standen

01732 445300

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MANAGEMENT

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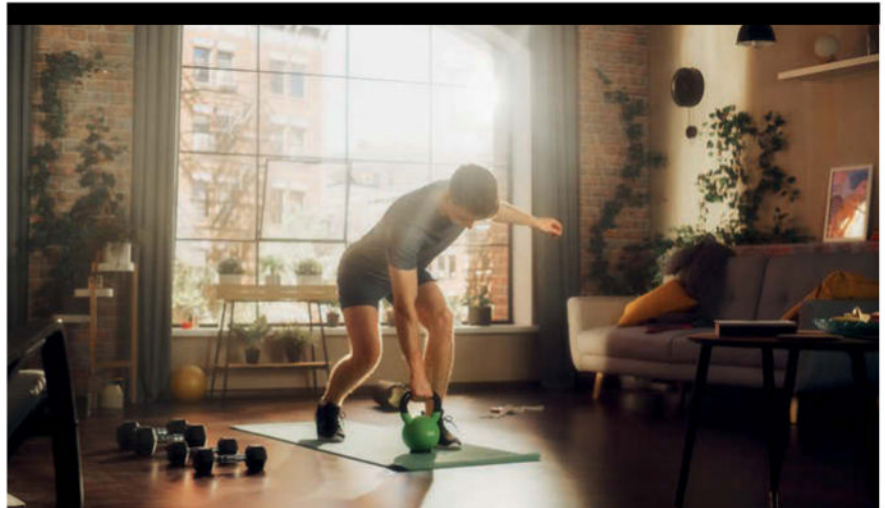
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This issue, we're excited to launch the first ever Men's Fitness Home Workout Awards. Even if, like me, you're someone who enjoys the escapism of getting out the house and into the gym, there will be plenty of products in these Awards that can make a genuine difference to your fitness, wherever you work out. From conventional weights (think dumbbells and kettlebells) to the cutting edge of fit-tech gadgets and wearables, for the past few months our crack team of expert testers have put hundreds of

products through their paces. The 49 featured in the pages that follow are, in our opinion, the very best in their respective categories.

Sticking with the 40s, we've rounded up 48 abs exercises to help you carve out a core of steel; on page 61 you'll find a number of meals to maximise muscle growth, courtesy of former cover model Scott Bapchie's *The Ultimate High Protein Handbook*; and at the back of the mag we've got the perfect mobility routine to open up your hips for full-body performance benefits.

Isaac Williams, Editor
isaac.williams@kelsey.co.uk

INSIDE: HOW TO...



1

Transform your home gym

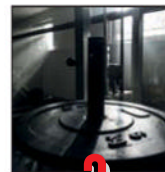
Check out the first MF Home Workout Awards (p18).



2

Become a fire fighter

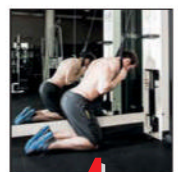
One writer tackles the fire service recruitment process, to see if he has what it takes (p40).



3

Conquer gymtimidation

Advice and alternative solutions for anyone intimidated by traditional gym settings (p46).



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Build bulletproof abs

Work your core from every angle with our comprehensive guide (p76).

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“With no visual feedback and the constant threat of time running out, disorientation and panic can quickly set in”



UPDATES

NO QUICK FIX

Multivitamins can be useful additions to an already healthy diet, but don't expect much more than that

▶▶ Taking a daily multivitamin supplement can be a cheap and easy way for you to make up for any nutrient gaps in that day's diet, but if you are popping these pills with the idea that it'll reduce your risk of a heart attack, stroke or other cardiovascular diseases, you're wasting your time. That's the verdict from a report published in the *American Heart Association* journal, which analysed the results from 18 studies involving more than two-

million subjects and examined the link between vitamin supplementation and heart health. Addressing the key triggers of heart disease - obesity, exercise, diet, high blood pressure and unhealthy cholesterol levels - has a far greater impact on improving life quality and longevity than a multivitamin, although the authors were quick to point out that moderate supplement use rarely caused direct harm.



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“THIS SPORT REQUIRES HIGH-LEVEL FITNESS, FLEXIBILITY AND MENTAL ALERTNESS TO EXECUTE THE PERFECT CHOP”

MF meets GB Timbersports athlete **Graham Turner**

Graham Turner is a Timbersports competitor and member of Team GB. In 2022, the 36-year-old became the first Scot on the winners' podium in the history of the STIHL British Timbersports Championship, securing second place.

We caught up with him ahead of the tenth British Championships...

Men's Fitness: Most young lads grow up wanting to be footballers – was Timbersports always the goal for you?

Graham Turner: Ha, no! Though as a child, I had a strong sports background, particularly in golf and rugby. After a couple of frustrating years in golf, I quit, turning my focus back to rugby. But later, running my own business and sustaining several injuries made me reconsider the risks of that sport, too.

MF: So what made you pick up an axe?

GT: In 2018, I discovered

Timbersports at the Royal Welsh show. One year later, after successfully getting through a selection day and several training camps, I competed in the newcomers category. Although I didn't perform spectacularly, the thrill of it drew me in.

MF: And from there it all took off?

GT: Well, not quite. I was gearing up to compete further when the pandemic struck. I used the lockdown in 2020 to intensively train and improve. Despite limited local competitions due to restrictions, I saw a significant improvement in my skills. When competition resumed in 2021, I was able to prove my ability and qualify as a professional Timbersports athlete.

MF: What is the appeal of this sport?

GT: Timbersports is unique in that it's you versus the log, not other competitors. Although there's a bit of luck involved in the nature of the log you get, it's

largely about your skill and how you handle it. The camaraderie between competitors is incredible – everyone's supportive of one another.

MF: What's required to succeed?

GT: Initially, I thought strength was key. But as I got into it, I realised this sport requires high-level fitness, flexibility and mental alertness to execute the perfect chop, especially under pressure.

It requires diverse physical training, due to varied disciplines. It's not about being the fastest or strongest – it's more about having endurance and good recovery. For example, one competition involves four back-to-back events to be completed in under two minutes. It's tough, but rewarding.

MF: How do you balance Timbersports training with a physical job?

GT: I step up strength work in the summer, going five times a week and chopping

logs twice. In addition, I work a labour-intensive job as a fencing contractor. When it's competition time, I'll increase my chopping practice in the evenings and on weekends.

My gym routine includes three weights sessions and two cardiovascular sessions weekly. They're not about lifting huge weights, but more about conditioning the muscles. Along with the chopping sessions, the goal is to improve my overall fitness, allowing me to operate at peak levels for longer periods. My ankle injuries hinder certain exercises, such as running, but I've compensated with biking, skiing and rowing – all with the aim of raising my base aerobic fitness.

The tenth STIHL TIMBERSPORTS® British Pro Championship took place at the Royal Three Counties show in Malvern on 17 June. Check out the **STIHL Facebook page** to find out how Graham Turner got on.



“

It's not about being the fastest or strongest – it's more about endurance



Interview: Rob Kemp | Photography: STIHL Timbersports

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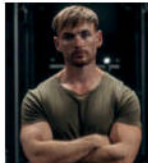
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FITNESS MYTH:

MUSCLE SORENESS IS AN INDICATOR OF A GOOD WORKOUT



MEET THE EXPERT

Ben Carpenter is, in his own words, a 'personal trainer, research nerd, international speaker and your trusted source of no-bullshit fitness information'. Head to bdccarpenter.com



If your goal is to build muscle, chances are you already know the feeling of delayed-onset muscle soreness (DOMS). Perhaps you have found yourself limping up and down the stairs for a couple of days after a leg workout, or struggling to lift your arm above your head after you train upper body.

In simple terms, the theory is that lifting weights causes exercise-induced muscle damage (EIMD), and your body adapts to this muscle damage by growing bigger and stronger. So, surely muscle soreness is a sure-fire sign that your workout was effective?

Actually, no. You can grow muscle tissue even in the absence of exercise-induced muscle damage, so just because soreness shows you did something in the gym, it doesn't mean that it always correlates with how effective a workout is. For example, you are most likely to feel sore when you provide your body with a novel stimulus – something new you aren't used to doing. A beginner may feel sore after their first squat workout, but Olympic lifters and powerlifters – who have been routinely squatting for years – won't feel as sore as they did after their first workout, yet they will continue to get stronger. This demonstrates the power of the 'repeated bout effect', where soreness dissipates when you practise the same thing repeatedly.

Forced adaptations

As your body often feels sore when you do something new, you could feel soreness after doing a yoga workout where you held poses you aren't used to holding, or running a marathon for the first time ever, but neither of these workouts would be considered the best choices for muscle building.

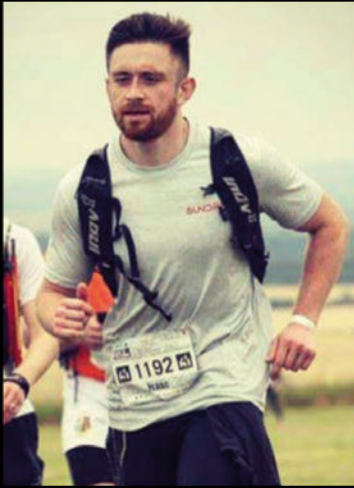
Also, extreme soreness can hinder your subsequent performance, so if you perform a leg workout with several brand-new exercises and then can't walk for a week because your legs are so sore, it reduces your capacity to train legs again. If you're in so much pain that you have to skip workouts or can't improve on your last session's performance, that can obviously hinder your long-term progress.

The simplified summary is that soreness is not a bad thing and you don't need to avoid it. If your goal is to build a lot of muscle, you will probably flirt with muscle soreness from time to time. But soreness is not a reliable indicator of long-term progress, so proactively striving to be as sore as possible after every single workout is not a smart idea. Focus on long-term progress, not short-term soreness.



Soreness dissipates when you practise the same thing repeatedly

YOUR ULTIMATE FITNESS GUIDE



Men's Fitness is about more than rippling muscles, or chicken and broccoli dinners. These days, we've expanded our remit slightly. Our extensive collection of workouts, strength training tips and nutrition advice will help you look the part, sure, but it's an unfortunate fact that big muscles don't equate to happiness. Which is why in the pages of our monthly issues and online at mensfitness.co.uk, you will also find the tools you need to improve all the unseen aspects of your health, too. If you're looking for celebrity training plans or quick-fix diets, you'll be better served elsewhere. However, if you want to learn how to make a healthy way of living second nature - no matter how busy you are - we've got you covered.

Isaac Williams **Editor**

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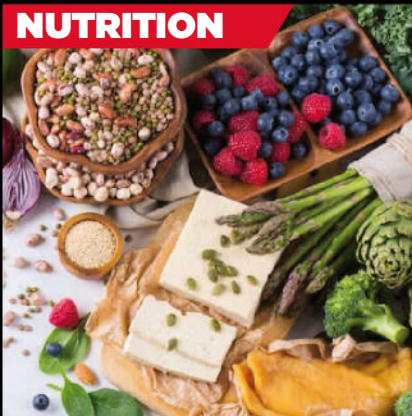
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PICTURE PREVIEW



It's time to stop viewing mobility work as an optional extra. For as long as you neglect the way your body moves, you won't enjoy a full range of motion. And if range of motion is compromised, your form will be too. Poor form then leads to, at best, much less effective workouts; at worst, injuries.

And the older you get, the more important this stuff becomes. So, if you are looking to build a body that stands the test of time, you need to make mobility work a central component of your weekly routine.

To help you get started, on page 96 we've got a hip mobility session for you to try – tag it onto the end of your next workout, or try it in front of the TV on your next rest day.

Photography: pliability
Model: @obi_vincent





MensFitness HOME WORKOUT

— AWARDS —
2023

The results are in for our first ever Home Workout Awards

The past few years served as a reminder that you don't need a gym full of kit to stay in shape. With a few smart equipment choices, you can build muscle, burn fat, even run a marathon if that's your bag, from the comfort of your own home.

But in a saturated market, with every fitness brand telling you theirs is the invaluable bit of kit you can't do without, picking the products right for you can be a daunting task. Which is where the Men's Fitness Home Workout Awards come in.

THE TESTING PROCESS

The *Men's Fitness* team and a few expert independent reviewers have been busy working up a sweat for your buying benefit. All the products shortlisted – plus the dozens that didn't quite make the cut – were tested for a minimum of two months. The categories are as follows:

- Fixed dumbbells
- Adjustable dumbbells
- Kettlebells
- Cardio machines
- Wearable tech
- Recovery tools

The results listed here are authentic endorsements of first-class products, based not on snap decisions or unqualified opinion, but a comprehensive review process. The kit that comes out on top has done so because it can make a genuine difference to your fitness, and greatly improve the home workout experience.



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If you could only own one item of fitness kit for the rest of your life, you'd do well to pick the humble dumbbell. Even the heaviest are small enough to fit in the corner of a room, and you can perform virtually every strength training exercise with the following sets.

BEST VALUE

BLK Box Rubber Hex Dumbbells
 £12-£154, blkboxfitness.com



Weight range: 2.5kg-60kg

These heavy-duty fixed hex dumbbells go all the way up to 60kg, making them one of the best options for anyone who wants serious weight to hand. The cast iron frame is covered in rubber to protect floors, and there are chrome-plated knurled handles to get a good hold of. That hex-style design means they're not going to roll around, and makes them well suited to floor-based exercises, such as renegade rows and dumbbell press-ups.

Corenigth Hex Dumbbell
 £11.99-£79.99, decathlon.co.uk



Weight range: 2.5kg-22.5kg

This fixed dumbbell from Decathlon consists of an iron frame wrapped up in rubber, for a more durable – not to mention floor-friendly – design compared to round plates. There's a good-sized metal, knurled handle to wrap your hands around, and the hex plate design adds an extra element of stability to the range.

BEST WEIGHT RANGE

Jordan Fitness Premium Urethane Dumbbells
 £42-£1,260, jordanfitness.com



Weight range: 2.5kg-75kg

These are going to appeal to experienced gym-goers who want to lift big, thanks to a best-in-test weight range starting at 2.5kg and going all the way up to a monstrous 75kg. Another option that will reduce the risk of scuffs and damage to your floor, there's also steel underneath that urethane – a rubber known for its immense durability – which has been heat treated, with a handle that offers plenty of non-slip metal to get to grips with.

BLK Box Rubber Hex Dumbbells
 £12-£154, blkboxfitness.com



Weight range: 2.5kg-60kg

BLK Box earns its double entry in this category, because not only are the lighter weights in particular highly affordable (£31 for a 10kg weight), but even a pair of the heavier options is well worth the money. Two hefty 60kg dumbbells, for example, will set you back £308 – comparatively excellent value.

BEST FOR BEGINNERS

Mirafit Rubber Dumbbell Set

£34.95-£199.95, mirafit.co.uk



Weight range: 5kg-35kg

These high-quality, easy-to-grip dumbbells are sold in pairs, with the heaviest weighing in at 35kg. The rubber coating makes them kinder to hard floors and the knurled steel handle offers a strong, durable place to grip. You can also pick them up in sets, if you want a greater variety of weights (a set of 5kg-30kg at 2.5kg increments costs £99.95) and Mirafit also makes racks, to give you that proper gym feel at home.

Corength Hex Dumbbell

£11.99-£79.99, decathlon.co.uk



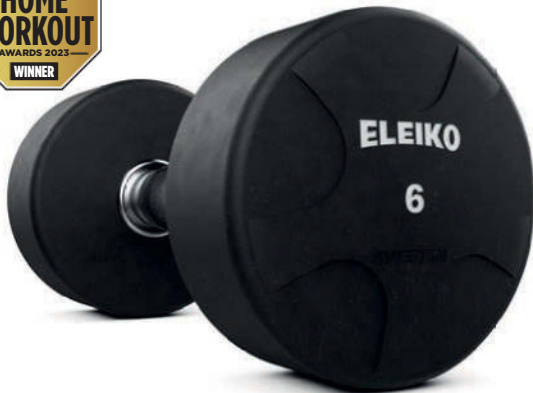
Weight range: 2.5kg-22.5kg

Hex-shaped dumbbells like Corength's offering might be a better fit for you if you're just starting out, because they're less likely to roll around under load, creating a more stable base for you to master certain exercises. These are also made from a forgiving rubber material, which – if dropped – will provide a bit of protection for the dumbbell itself, floors and the user.

BEST FOR HARD FLOORS

Eleiko Vulcano Dumbbell

£28-£379, eleiko.com



Weight range: 1kg-40kg

These are well-constructed dumbbells that will work for whatever workout you throw at them. They feature chrome steel handles that are sloped and knurled, to make sure you can get a good grip even with sweaty hands, and the ends are coated in protective polyurethane, which softens the blow should you accidentally drop them. That makes them better suited to home workouts, particularly if you've got hard floors and are worried about potential scuffing.

DKN Rubber Hex Dumbbells

£29.99-£229.99, dkn-uk.com



Weight range: 2kg-30kg

DKN's hex dumbbell sets come in pairs, peaking at 30kg per dumbbell. The hex design means they'll stay put in-between sets, and there are solid steel handles with a knurled pattern to provide a reliable grip even when you start to sweat. The rubber coating ensures a good amount of durability, too, and won't do damage to your floor should you accidentally drop the weights.

If you want to set up a small gym at home, you'll need a selection of dumbbells that cover a useful range. Trying to cover that range with individual weights, however, will not only take up a significant amount of floorspace, but burn a hole in your wallet. So investing in a set of adjustable dumbbells makes sense. The initial outlay may seem expensive, but if you choose the right set it should cover all your lifting needs.

BEST VALUE

Primal Strength Personal Series 34kg Adjustable Dumbbell (Pair)

£499, primalstrength.com



Weight range: 5kg-34kg

You get what you pay for with these Primal Strength 34kg adjustable dumbbells: a high-quality, versatile investment for any home gym. Over nearly a 30kg range, you get a whopping 21 different weights to work with – enough to satisfy even the most experienced weight trainer. They're longer than most adjustable dumbbells, but the slider selection system is a breeze to use and the handles stay comfortable throughout.

Muscle Squad 5kg-32.5kg Quick Select Adjustable Dumbbell

£190, musclesquad.com



Weight range: 5kg-32.5kg

With 12 adjustment settings over a 27.5kg range, this MuscleSquad set gives you plenty of options to fine-tune your workouts. To adjust, you simply place the dumbbell on the included dock, turn the dial to your desired weight and start lifting. Its handle is soft and textured for a comfortable grip, and the gripping mechanism works smoothly and securely.

BEST WEIGHT RANGE

Bowflex 4-41Kg SelectTech 1090i Dumbbells

£699, fitness-superstore.co.uk



Weight range: 4kg-41kg

Bowflex's rubber and steel grip is well designed for more explosive exercises and fast-paced workouts. More importantly for the purposes of this review, you can move from 4kg all the way up to 41kg with the simple twist of a dial. Bowflex also offers on-demand strength classes via its accompanying JRNY app, so you can put the dumbbells to work with recommended exercises and workouts. Connect your weights to JRNY, and it will even track reps and provide form-guidance tips.

BRAINGAIN 40kg Octagon Adjustable Dumbbells (Pair)

£549.99, braingain.fit



Weight range: 2.5kg-40kg

An industrial-strength set of weights with a smart design, each of BRAINGAIN's 40kg adjustable dumbbells contains 16 weight options. The handles are grippy enough without being uncomfortable, and even at the heaviest weight the plates stay watertight. What you're getting is plenty of weight to play around with, contained within an easy twist-and-lift adjustment system. A separate stand can be bought if you want a more convenient storage option.

BEST FOR BEGINNERS

BodyMax 25kg Selectabell Adjustable Dumbbell Pair and Rack

£447.30, powerhouse-fitness.co.uk



Weight range: 4.5kg-25kg

One of the slickest dumbbell designs on the market and very easy to get to grips with. The selector pin (just click and lift) is simple and effective, and the plates are nice and sturdy – no rattling going on here. The dumbbells, docking station and weight plates come with instructions to get you started, but the design is simple and intuitive, so you probably won't need them.

JaxJox DumbbellConnect

£499, jaxjox.co.uk



Weight range: 3.6kg-22.6kg

With a digital docking station and performance tracking app, these JaxJox adjustable dumbbells are an impressive piece of kit. They use a USB-powered digital dock for weight selection and a companion app to suggest exercises and track progress. Just sync the app for real-time data, such as reps, weight, sets, time, average power and total volume. They do the basics well, too – including a robust design, comfortable grooved handles and secure locking plates.

EASIEST TO ADJUST

Nuobell 2-32kg Adjustable Dumbbells

£699, fitness-superstore.co.uk



Weight range: 2kg-32kg

One of the best adjustable dumbbell systems we had the pleasure of testing. A seamless twist of the handles allow you to cycle between the different weights in an instant – weights which go up to an impressive 32kg, we should add – and there's no rattling around of plates when you're lifting. The handles have a decent amount of grip and, all in all, this is a stylish and elegant set of weights that manages to marry good looks with chart-topping practicality.

Primal Strength Personal Series 34kg Adjustable Dumbbell (Pair)

£449.99, primalstrength.com



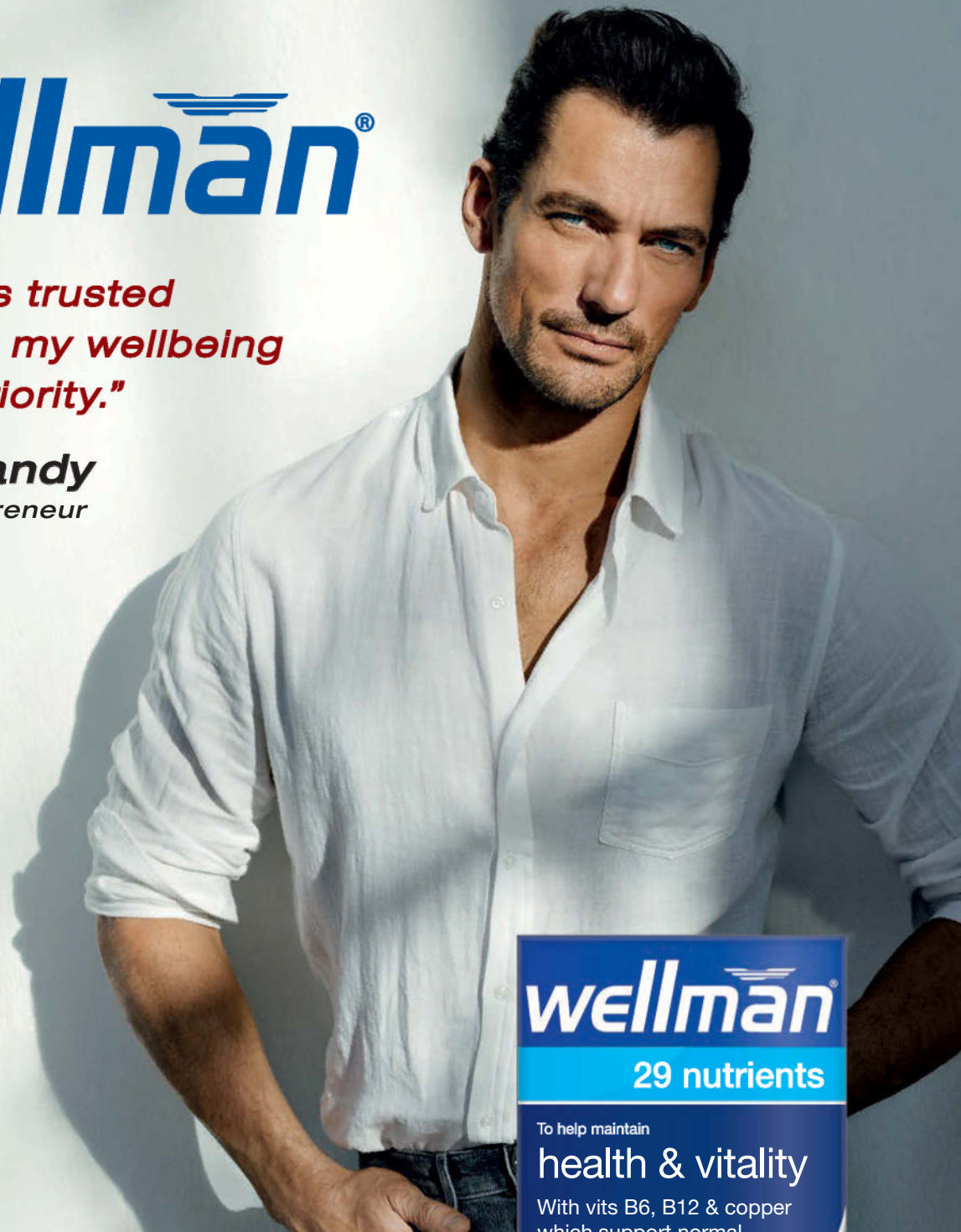
Weight range: 5kg-34kg

Primal Strength's 34kg pair couldn't be easier to adjust: once docked, simply move the sliders to the desired weight and get lifting. Getting started requires nothing more than a glance at the instructions, and the set offers you 21 different weight options, from 5kg to 34kg. That's enough of a range, whatever your experience.

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KETTLEBELLS

Want to build full-body strength at home? Then the versatile kettlebell should be high on your kit list. It's a relatively cheap piece of gear that's good for everything from building functional strength, to heart-pumping HIIT sessions, and even recovery and mobility work.

BEST VALUE

Mirafit Soft Touch Cast Iron Kettlebell

£19.95-£89.95, mirafit.com



Weight range: 6kg-32kg

A chunk cheaper than others in this category, Mirafit's powder-coated kettlebells offer excellent bang for your buck. The sleek kettlebells come in a nine-weight range that jumps up in decent increments, from 6kg to 36kg, so there's an option for pretty much all strengths and drills. They're good value individually, but you can also buy them in a set for added savings. Underneath that protective coating, there's a durable single-cast, weld-free, cast-iron kettlebell, while the flat base offers wobble-free set-down and storage.

TRX Rubber Coated Kettlebell

£44.96-£247.46, trxtraining.eu



Weight range: 4kg-28kg

You'll probably know TRX for its popular suspension training systems. But nowadays the company offers a much broader range of home gym kit, which includes a range of rubber-coated kettlebells with eight different weights, ranging from 4kg to 28kg. Underneath that protective rubber coating, you've got a gravity-cast, cast-iron kettlebell with a machined-flat base that makes for easy set-downs and reliable storage. Each kettlebell has colour coding on the handle, too, so if you're building a set you can spot your weights easily.

BEST WEIGHT RANGE

Wolverson Competition Kettlebells

£74.99-£139.99, wolverson-fitness.co.uk



Weight range: 4kg-32kg

Wolverson Competition Kettlebells are made from high-grade iron using solid one-piece casting techniques, with no welding and a hollow core. So what you get is expert weight distribution that won't change over time, plus class-leading tolerance in a solid and durable package. There are eleven weights in the range, but because they're competition-style bells, you get the same consistent sizing as you move up the weight range. Plus, all of them have a stand-flat base for easy set-down and storage.

Ironmaster Quick-Lock Kettlebell Handle

£219 (for the quick-lock handle + heavy weight tool kit - weight plates sold separately), ironmaster.co.uk



Weight range: 10kg-36kg

OK, so not technically a kettlebell in its own right, but hear us out... Ironmaster's Quick-Lock Handle is designed to attach to Ironmaster's weight plates. The standard handle (£119) can hold up to 26kg, but with the 'Weight Kit' add-on (£100), the handle can be upgraded to cope with anything up to 36kg. The handle is as smooth and ergonomic as anything else we tested, and the locking mechanism is ultra secure - so you don't need to worry about the attached plates flying off mid-swing.

BEST FOR BEGINNERS

JLL Neoprene Covered Cast Iron Kettlebells£37.99 (for 14kg), jllfitness.co.uk

Weight range: 2kg-24kg

Probably the easiest-to-handle kettlebell we tested, this offering from JLL is not only comfortable but durable, thanks to its cast-iron structure and protective neoprene coating. Officially these come in 2kg increments, from 2kg to 24kg. However, check the website, as certain weights seem to be regularly low in stock. When you do get your hands on your desired kettlebell, you'll have a supremely comfortable bit of kit with an easy-grip handle that's extra forgiving on the hands.

Body Power Black Rubber Coated Kettlebell£13.99-£85.99, fitness-superstore.co.uk

Weight range: 6kg-24kg

A solid chrome build and rubber coating make Body Power's Black Rubber Coated Kettlebell highly resistant to drops, scrapes, and general wear and tear. Its chrome handle ensures comfortable handling, and the nine-weight range – from 6kg to 24kg – will be more than enough for any kettlebell newbie. A balanced base, meanwhile, means it will stand of its own accord, despite maintaining a nice rounded shape.

BEST ADJUSTABLE KETTLEBELL

Bowflex SelectTech 840 Kettlebell£149.99, fitness-superstore.co.uk

Weight range: 3.5kg-18kg

If your square meterage is squeezed, but you still want a full range of kettlebell weights, the Bowflex SelectTech 840 is a great option. The biggest USP here is the space-saving design that lets you use up to six separate weights on one slick kettlebell – and stow it easily afterwards. Its footprint is still bigger than most regular kettlebells, but there's no need for multiple bells scattered all over the house. A dial on top allows you to adjust the weight, so moving from one weight and exercise to the next couldn't be simpler. The SelectTech 840's ergonomic handle, meanwhile, makes it easy on the hands.

JaxJox KettlebellConnect 2.0£250, jaxjox.co.uk

Weight range: 5.5kg-19kg

A space-saving selectable kettlebell that's great if you're tight on room, but unlike most cast-iron kettlebells this one also has a brain that brings your swing training to life – so it's a kettlebell and a coach. With motion sensors inside, this kettlebell not only tracks reps, sets and power, but lets you follow complete drill-by-drill workouts on your phone – or join on-demand coach-led classes, tracking stats as you go. It will also spit out a FitnessIQ score: essentially just a number that goes up the more you train, but a good way to benchmark your weekly progress and incentivise your workouts.

If you're ready to upgrade from a few weights stashed in the corner of the room to a bona fide home gym set-up, a cardio machine will take you there. The best machines will of course help you build aerobic fitness from home, but they should also be efficiently designed to take up less space, quiet enough to avoid complaints from the neighbours, and easy for anyone to use.

BEST ROWING MACHINE



Hydrow Wave Rower

£1,595 (plus monthly membership), hydrox.com

The Hydrow Wave is a more slimline, less space-consuming version of the brand's original model, measuring about 30% smaller. It's an exquisite bit of kit. With a minimal design of neat, curved edges, complemented by high-quality materials, such as brushed aluminium and steel, it has an elegance and robustness that justifies its price tag. It also feels incredibly smooth, thanks to its drag technology and computer-controlled resistance, which have been developed to replicate the natural feel of rowing on water. You will appreciate that smoothness when you're really going for it.

As for the Hydrow platform, it's easy to use and boasts an array of engaging live daily workouts with Hydrow athletes, including Olympians and world-class rowers, alongside an ever-growing library of on-demand content. Ultimately, the Hydrow Wave offers one of the

best authentic rowing experiences on the market. It feels robust, looks stunning and would prove a great complement to any home gym.



Dimensions: H 110cm x L 204cm x W 49cm



WaterRower Original Series Oak With S4 Performance Monitor

£1,099, waterrower.co.uk

The WaterRower is an unusual and beautifully designed take on the home rowing machine. Rather than using air resistance, the WaterRower uses a unique water flywheel, which mimics rowing on water. It's remarkably realistic and provides an immersive, enjoyable workout. The design of the WaterRower provides a smoother pull than other rowers, as it reduces the jerkiness from a regular chain. It uses two rails for the seat instead of the more common one, which adds to its smoothness and stability. And the sound of the water moving provides a relaxing effect, for meditative sessions.

Not only does the WaterRower provide a unique and realistic rowing experience, it's also easier to store upright than most rowers. In terms of ergonomics and design, it blows all other rowing machines out of the water. In fact, it almost looks too beautiful to use, but that means it can become the

centrepiece of your exercise space, rather than feeling the need to stow it away after every session.



Dimensions: H 53cm x L 209cm x W 56cm

BEST EXERCISE BIKE



Dimensions: Max H 150cm x Frame L 100cm x Frame W 50cm

Wattbike Atom

£2,399 (plus monthly membership), wattbike.com

The Wattbike has long been a popular weapon in the war on comfort zones, and the 2023 incarnation of the Atom is closer to a future where the indoor training experience better mimics grinding the gears on your nearest climbs.

Unlike some stationary set-ups, which take hours to construct and calibrate, the Atom comes practically ready to ride out of the box. Vertical and horizontal sliders for the saddle, and height adjustment for the handlebars, make tweaking the cycling position nice and easy, with thankfully very little wielding of allen keys. You can also bring your own pedals and handlebars to customise your ride.

The Atom's magnetic resistance, with a 0–2000W power range and $\pm 2\%$ data accuracy, makes for much quieter – though still not silent – training sessions. The ride

feels close to real, supported by the inclusion of integrated gear shifts like you'd find on your regular road bike. That's particularly important when it comes to moving up and down the 22 gears mid-ride, while you're tackling automated gradient simulation that ranges from 0–25%.

When it comes to simulating hills, automated resistance in climb mode serves up the full ride experience – complete with burning lungs and quads. Meanwhile, Bluetooth and ANT+ F-EC mean there's wide connectivity with your favourite accessories and fitness apps, so you can lose yourself in the routes and training sessions in virtual platforms, such as Zwift and Trainer Road.

Even if you're not a Zwifter, you can still access more than 37 real-time ride metrics and training plans in the Wattbike Hub.



Dimensions: Max H 117cm x Frame L 139cm x Frame W 75cm

Garmin Tacx® NEO Bike Plus Trainer

£3,499 (plus monthly membership), garmin.com

A smart training bike that pairs with third-party apps for interactive virtual riding and racing on courses around the world. But it's the Tacx Training app that unleashes its full potential. Pick a course that features cobbles or gravel, for example, and the bike will vibrate to replicate the experience of riding on these surfaces. It could be one of the most immersive virtual riding experiences yet.

In manual mode, you use the buttons on the inside of the shifter hoods to adjust the slope (up to 25%), power or resistance. You can adjust these mid-ride too, to tailor

your session or dial in intervals. Alternatively, you can work your way through detailed training rides with pre-programmed changes to slope, power and resistance. These are ideal for specific training routines, but have little in the way of interaction or immersion.

For that you need to pick a GPS ride or movie option. Both give you a choice of famous climbs and courses, as well as interesting city rides or entire multi-day tours. The GPS rides feature real-time map displays, showing other Tacx users that are on the same course – a real plus for the competitive cyclist.

BEST TREADMILL



The Peloton Tread has revolutionised run workouts for the home gym crowd, with its huge variety of live and on-demand workouts and its first-class instruction. No surprises, then, that the price tag sets it at the higher end of the treadmill market: because you're not just paying for something to run on, you're paying for access to a new workout world in which you'll find the run to suit your mood, your music taste, your training goals and so much more.

Logging on to the crisp and large touchscreen makes a Peloton Tread workout feel like the real deal – you will be as

motivated and supported as you would at an in-person, studio-style workout. There are also some intuitive design features that are unique to the Tread, such as the Speed and Incline knobs, which have a central button, which allows you to jump a whole level for quick progression. And more recently, Peloton has introduced an auto-incline feature, allowing the treadmill to automatically adjust the incline to match the

session underway. (If you're not keen on that, you can turn this function off if you don't want to use it.)

It's also worth noting that the pace (in min/mile) and distance metrics seem to be accurate with what we experienced on the road and during other run sessions, so it's easy to set the levels to suit your ability.



Dimensions: H 157cm, L 173cm, W 84cm

Peloton Tread

£3,345 (plus monthly membership), onepeloton.co.uk



If lack of space puts you off getting a home treadmill, folding options make a lot of sense – but quality, rigidity and stability can vary considerably. The Echelon Stride falls into this folding bracket, but its quality design means that the user experience isn't compromised.

Packing the Echelon Stride away is surprisingly straightforward, thanks to its motorised auto-fold feature. And the handlebars automatically fold down flat, which allows you to slide the treadmill under your bed or push it vertically against a wall. That means you can free up space for free weights or mobility work almost instantly.

The Stride can hit speeds of 19kmp/h (12mph), so it's suitable

for everything from walking and jogging to sprint workouts – and the deck feels cushioned and springy.

The standout feature of the Stride, of course, is its slim, folding design. At just 25cm (10in) thick, it's easy to fold and move, thanks to the large steel handle at the rear. The two sets of transport wheels allow it to be rolled in any direction, too.

Its 1.75 HP motor is surprisingly quiet, too, making it suitable for use in any room in the house. The console is fairly stripped-back, but if that alone doesn't offer enough feedback, you can download the Echelon app. Paying your monthly subscription means you can look forward to the daily live runs or

cross-training classes, such as the Stride Bootcamp. That splits class time between the treadmill and strength training. Or you can go for race runs, which place you on a live community leaderboard based on your effort.

Echelon Stride Auto-Fold Connected Treadmill

£1,399 (plus monthly membership), echelonfit.uk



Dimensions: H 124.5cm, L 175.2cm, W 78.7cm (in use)
/ H 25.4cm, L 175.2cm, W 78.7cm (folded)

BEST SKI MACHINE

Concept2 SkiErg£815, concept2.com

Dimensions: H 216cm, L 40.6cm, W at top 52cm

There are a number of ski machines on the market these days, but the Concept2 SkiErg can lay claim to being the original and still the best. Much like other cardio machines, the SkiErg has a PM5 screen (a small one), which is simple to use and pretty self-explanatory. There's the option to change the units in which you measure your output (watts, strokes per minute, calories and distance, for example). Plus you can change the layout of the display. You might want to work against an electronic ski pacemaker, do your own thing, or follow one of the pre-set workouts. Overall, the Concept2 SkiErg is an impressive piece of kit that will help to condition both your cardio system and upper body.

Wolverson Ski Trainer (MK2)£779.99, wolverson-fitness.co.uk

Dimensions: H 45.5cm, L 123.5cm, W 58cm

The Wolverson Ski Trainer is a robust cardio machine designed to simulate cross-country skiing, similar in design to the Concept2. It can be mounted on the wall or attached to a stand, giving you flexibility in terms of where you can use and store it. Weighing only 37kg, it's easy to move with two wheels at the rear, and the width of only 60cm means it doesn't take up too much space – although you'll need more than 225cm in ceiling height. The Ski Trainer can pair up with heart rate monitors, so you can monitor your work rate, and its display provides all the important information for monitoring progress, such as speed, distance, time, calories, stroke rate and pulse.

BEST AIR BIKE

AssaultBike Classic£749.99, assault-fitness.co.uk

Dimensions: H 139.7cm, L 139.9cm, W 66.7cm

Assault Fitness is a name that's become synonymous with calorie-torching cardio equipment. That reputation is almost singlehandedly due to its AssaultBike. Pro athletes, CrossFitters and regular gym-goers alike test their stamina on this no-nonsense machine, which has come to be seen as industry standard in both enthusiast and elite fitness spaces. This version, the Classic, is the cheapest of Assault Fitness' three models. If you want more app connectivity, the Bluetooth and ANT+ equipped Pro and Elite models might be the way to go. But for most home users, the AssaultBike Classic has everything you need: a robust design, good ergonomics, easy-to-access workouts, and comfortable and adjustable contact points.

Schwinn Airdyne AD8 Dual Action Air Cycle£1,199, fitness-superstore.co.uk

Dimensions: H 134.6cm, L 134.5cm, W 67.50cm

One major advantage of the air bike is that it's not particularly technical. While good technique will allow you to be more efficient, you'll get a solid, lung-busting workout however you go about it. That said, the latest iteration of the Schwinn Airdyne makes it especially hard to go wrong. Seat adjustment can be done in seconds with two twisting dials, and the easy-to-read monitor is simple and intuitive: with calories, watts, time, distance, speed, RPM, and heart rate readouts. And while no machine that relies on air resistance is going to be especially quiet, we were impressed by the reduced noise of the AD8 compared to previous models.

From watches to 'smart rings', headphones to heart rate monitors, the wearable tech market is booming. But with so many products out there – covering virtually every body part – sorting genuinely useful gadgets from less-than-impressive gimmicks can seem a daunting task...

BEST SPORTS WATCH



Apple Watch Series 8

£419, apple.com

If you have an iPhone and want an Apple Watch, but you aren't into endurance sports – or simply can't justify shelling out more than £800 for an Apple Watch Ultra – then the Series 8 is the smartwatch for you. Apple Watches are simply the best option for iPhone users and the Series 8 continues what made the Series 7 great: incredible app support, wellness features like heart rate tracking, SpO2 monitoring, ECG and fall detection. It also features automatic cycling detection, better durability than some past-gen watches with a crack-resistant crystal display, and water-resistance up to 50m. The latest line also introduces a thermometer for temperature

detection, as well as crash detection, so it's able to call emergency services if it detects you've been in a collision.

If smart features are your main concern, and you love the styling of Apple's ubiquitous wearable, then the Apple Watch really is a great balance of the latest features in an accessible package. Available with cellular connectivity as standard, up to 4G, you have more buying options than the competition, with the Apple Watch available either off-contract or on networks such as Vodafone for roughly £23 a month. And if you're still up in the air about shelling out for an Apple Watch Series 8, the Apple Watch SE is a smart alternative with a lower price tag.



Estimated battery life: 18 hours



Huawei Watch GT 3

£349.99 (for the Light Strap), consumer.huawei.com

The Huawei Watch GT 3 is a good-looking option with a lovely feel to it, which can be picked up in a few styles and prices. Its expansive touch display is finger-friendly and responsive, and the digital crown and button combo makes interaction with it intuitive. Huawei's voice trainer activates when you start a workout – delivering loud, abrasive updates to everyone within earshot as to how your training is going. Fortunately, you can quieten this feature, or turn it off completely. The watch misses out on the app support you can expect from the Apple Watch or Garmin options, but that quibble can't be remedied with a dive into settings.

With accurate heart rate tracking, SpO2 measurements,

excellent sleep reporting and basic notification support – you can read all your notifications and reply to messages with preset responses – you still get plenty of bang for your buck with the GT 3. The best thing about the watch, however, is its battery life. Pick up the larger option and you can eke out two weeks of use from a single charge. Better still, as with the GT 3 Pro, the vanilla GT 3 charges wirelessly and uses the same charger as the majority of phones.

With Android and iOS support, Huawei's wearables are among the best when it comes to cross-device compatibility, making them a winning mix of style, smarts, value and fitness tracking.



Estimated battery life: Up to 14 days

BEST SPORTS HEADPHONES



Jaybird Vista 2
£189.99, jaybirdsport.com



Estimated battery life: 8 hours

Jaybird has an excellent track record for sports headphones. The Vista 2 follows a winning formula: big battery life, solid customisable sound and secure wingtip fit. But there are notable new smarts, too. This version comes with more total playback time (24 hours with the case), military-grade durability buds and a weatherproof case, plus new Active Noise Cancellation (ANC). Audio performance is pleasingly solid: rich and full, with a meaty top volume and excellent customisation in the partner app. That includes a personalised hearing test and the option to create sound profiles. Durability is impressive, with an IP68 rating that means they're water-, sweat-, dust-, drop- and crush-proof. We left them in water for 30 minutes, dropped and walked on them (repeatedly), and they survived.



Nothing Ear (2)
£129, nothing.tech



Estimated battery life: 36 hours (varies drastically with noise cancellation)

A wallet-friendly rival to Apple's AirPods and AirPods Pro, the Nothing Ear (2) pack eight hours of music playback after just a ten-minute charge, and an Apple-beating 36 hours in the case. That's impressive staying power, and puts the workout time right up there with the longest-lasting true wireless earbuds. They're light and lock relatively tight in the ears. The sound, ANC and awareness modes aren't world-beating, but overall these kick out rich, full-bodied tunes and the transparent design gives them some unique style swagger. An excellent budget option.

BEST HEART RATE MONITOR

Garmin HRM Pro+
£119, garmin.com



Estimated battery life: 360 hours

The Garmin HRM-Pro Plus features a small, lightweight sensor module that fits within the width of a soft, comfortable strap, making it one of the less intrusive chest straps to wear for longer training sessions. It runs on traditional watch batteries rather than rechargeables, but will give you an hours' training a day for a year before it runs out. It almost matches the Polar H10 for accuracy, but outsmarts its rival with additional multi-sport dynamics, particularly for running. Connectivity is impressive, too, with three concurrent Bluetooth connections, plus unlimited ANT+ connections.

Polar H10
£76.50, polar.com



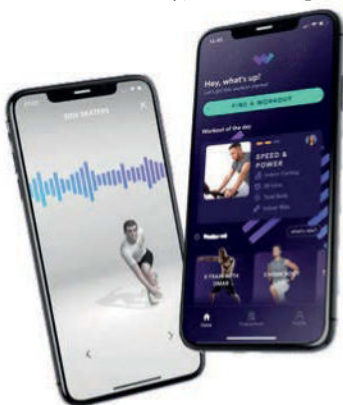
Estimated battery life: 400 hours

The Polar H10 sets the standard as far as accuracy is concerned – it literally never misses a beat. It's fairly light, too, with a soft strap, ergonomic design and no-fuss quick-release clip for easy removal. Polar has also gone with watch batteries over rechargeable ones, but you'll get 400 hours of run time before you need to change them. Its Bluetooth and ANT+ connectivity plays nicely with various watch brands, and you'll probably want to connect as the unit can only store one workout at a time. If running dynamics aren't your thing and you just want accurate tracking, you can't go wrong with the Polar H10.

BEST FITNESS APP

WithU

£79.99 per year (or £9.99 per month)
for premium membership, withutraining.com

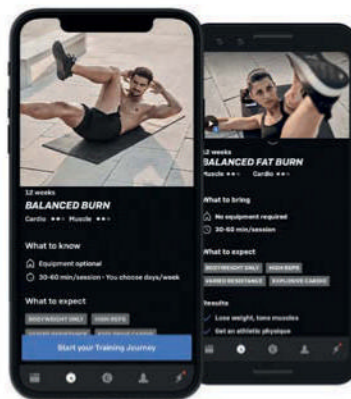


Highlight: WithU's new Apple Watch app allows you to enjoy the same workout experience delivered directly to your Apple Watch, so you can leave your phone at home.

Co-developed by Olympic 400m runner Tim Benjamin, WithU is an audio-based fitness platform with over 1,000 workouts. Each session lasts around 30 minutes, and every class we took featured an engaging instructor. The 5k training plans, in particular, will force you to run faster, while the interval training sessions should reinvigorate anyone guilty of just doing the same run each week. We also enjoyed not having to prop our phone up during the HIIT classes, as the audio is impressively easy to follow. If you've no idea what the exercises are, though, you can check your screen for animations.

Freeletics

From £32.99 (for three months), freeletics.com



Highlight: Freeletics adapts your training based on your own quick post-workout assessments. You can even adapt the day's session if you need to train quietly, you're too sore or you don't have much time.

Freeletics is perfect for kit-free, personalised home workouts. You can choose from a huge selection of workouts, target specific muscles and sign up for goal-based training journeys, covering everything from MMA fighter training to building explosive strength. Video demos for each drill are well presented, with excellent written technique tips and easy-to-follow visuals. If you're struggling to get into regular training, or you're hitting a plateau, there are also short mindset audio courses, to help you with the mental side of building good habits and tapping into long-lasting motivation.

BEST HEALTH TRACKER

Oura Ring Gen3

\$299 (plus monthly membership), ouraring.com

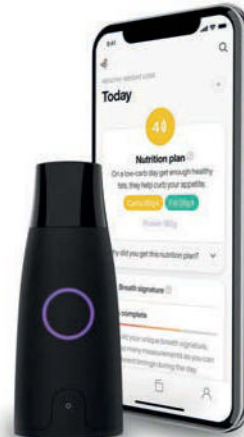


Highlight: The Oura Ring Gen3 provides a 'Restorative Time' metric, which tracks physical and mental recovery by understanding how much time you spend in a relaxed state each day

The most discrete of fitness trackers, this third-generation Oura packs three times more sensors, improving the sleep, heart rate variability (HRV) and readiness smarts of a ring that was already an incredible feat of engineering. In addition to HRV, you get resting heart rate, body temperature, sleep, recovery index and your previous day's activity levels. You also now get all-day heart rate tracking and workout heart rate insights – all contained within a slick-looking piece of faux jewellery.

Lumen

From £249 (plus monthly membership), lumen.me



Highlight: By hitting the right macros at the right times, the idea is that you can train your body to switch more efficiently from carbs to fat and vice versa – improving your metabolic flexibility.

This ground-breaking device crams lab-grade metabolic tech into a portable breathalyser that measures the CO₂ in your breath, to identify when you're burning fat, carbs or both. That's not only useful for knowing if you really need that banana to top up your fuel ahead of a workout; the Lumen app also uses your daily readings – along with your daily macro, workout time and sleep – to paint a clearer picture of your metabolic health.

Far Infrared Heat

Soothing Energising Detoxifying

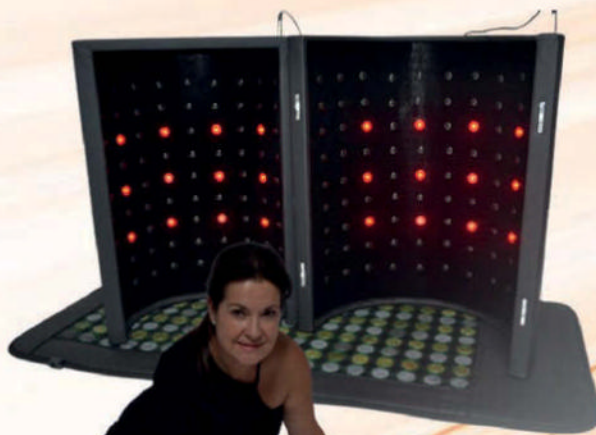
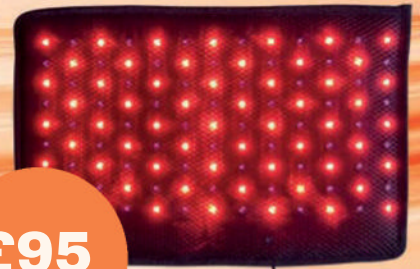


from
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£269

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Sauna Domes

Optional jade/bian stone mat
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BEST MASSAGE GUN



Theragun PRO
£469, therabody.com



Highlight: The PRO reaches 60% deeper into muscles than average massagers.

With older Theragun iterations, it wasn't easy to know when you were using them right, but this generation is smarter. Along with an OLED screen and force meter to see whether you're applying the right amount of pressure, the PRO syncs to the Therabody app. There, you can access real-time, move-by-move guides for everything from easing tight hamstrings to freeing up stiff shoulders. It's much quieter and more customisable than older models, and comes with five built-in speeds (but on the app you can set the percussions anywhere within the 1,750-2,400 range). Just two minutes' attention to each muscle group does a game-changing job of easing post-workout soreness.



Hyperice Hypervolt 2 Pro
£329, hyperice.com



Highlight: Access guided routines and adjust the speed via the Hyperice app.

A massage gun might seem a big investment for anyone taking tentative steps back into regular training, but don't underestimate the motivational value of simply having muscles that aren't sore. The Hypervolt 2 Pro delivers up to three hours of soothing percussive massage, to loosen your tight bits, and offers five variable speeds, plus a digital dial and app control that makes it easy to move up through the gears.

BEST FOAM ROLLER



**TriggerPoint GRID 2.0
Foam Roller**
£68.99, balega.co.uk



Highlight: At 26 inches in length, the GRID 2.0 offers plenty of room and a more stable surface than shorter rollers.

Foam rolling is based on the principle of myofascial release: the freeing up of your fascia (the thin connective tissue that holds everything in place), to reduce stiffness and improve mobility. And TriggerPoint is the Roller's Royce of products in this space. An extra-hard, hollow core makes it firmer than most other rollers which, combined with the grooved surface, is designed to replicate the pressure and variation of a conventional sports massage.



Lululemon Double Roller
£48, lululemon.co.uk



Highlight: The intricate grooved design gets to work on tight muscles in a way that feels more effective than smooth rollers.

A snazzy-looking roller with a hidden secret: the Double Foam Roller features a removable inner roller with more prominent grooves, for releasing tension in your back – with the exterior roller designed for your legs and arms. And when you're not working on any of the above, you can sit back and admire the pretty pattern.

BEST COMPRESSION BOOT



Therabody RecoveryAir JetBoots

£799, therabody.com



Highlight: FastFlush Technology™ delivers the pressure massage two to three times faster than other compression boots.

The RecoveryAir JetBoots possess two major differences over other compression boots. One: they're wireless, so they're much easier to use. Two: they use precise, sequential pneumatic compression, to improve circulation and shift metabolic waste created by tough sessions. The compression system follows the body's natural circulatory flow from foot to thigh, helping to reduce muscle soreness, decrease swelling and stiffness, and relieve muscle fatigue. The Jetboots' controls couldn't be easier to use, either, with plug and play presets for time and pressure.



Hyperice Normatec 3 Legs

£899, hyperice.com



Highlight: Normatec is, according to the brand website, 'the most tested, and most scientifically backed dynamic air compression system on the market.'

Another compression boot that leaves aching, tired legs feel noticeably, well, less tired. With the Normatec 3, you get equally effective recovery credentials as the JetBoots – again with the use of that magic ingredient, air, to compress then release the legs with the aim of flushing out toxins. Controlling the Normatec 3 is a doddle, with the simple, intuitive control unit: just select your power level, which areas of your legs you want to target and how long for.

BEST INNOVATION



Eight Sleep Pod 3 Cover

£2,145, eightsleep.com



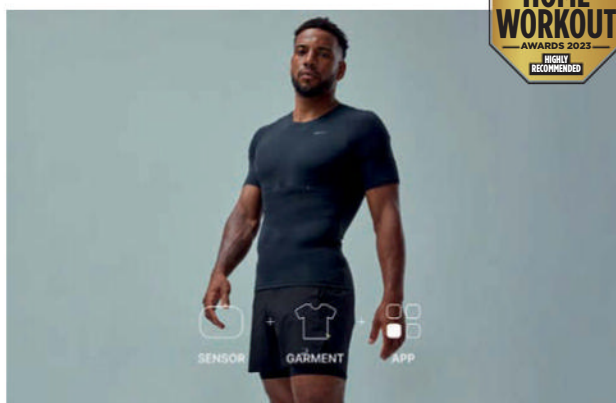
Highlight: The Pod 3's 'Autopilot' feature constantly and automatically adjusts temperature throughout the night, to keep you in as deep a sleep as possible.

While most sleep tech simply tells us if we're getting enough quality zeds, Eight Sleep goes a step further. This smart cover slips over your existing mattress and tracks a broad suite of stats, including sleeping heart rate, sleep time, sleep stages (REM, light and deep), and tosses and turns. It then uses that data to intelligently adjust your bed's temperature, to optimise your sleep stages. You can set bedtime schedules, and personalise the temperature when you get in and out of bed – a luxury. Ultimately, Eight Sleep helps you create effective habits that can noticeably improve your sleep.



Prevayl

From £210, shop.prevayl.com



Highlight: The sensor tracks 1,000 data points per second – that's 'four times more ECG data than any other wearable', according to Prevayl – with good accuracy by tracking close to the heart.

To get the biggest bang-for-buck from your sessions, you need to avoid the no-man's land where your intensity is too low to improve your aerobic fitness, or too fast to be good for recovery. Prevayl's smart training wear uses a removable pod that works with built-in sensors, to accurately track real-time intensity, a bit like a chest strap. Unlike classic monitors, the Prevayl app lets you set long-term intensity goals, thus ensuring you spend the right amount of time in the right zones, to help build that cardio engine effectively.

VOTE IN THE MEN'S FITNESS READER AWARDS

Our Reader Awards are your chance to let us know which brands have had a positive impact on your fitness journey

What sets these Awards apart – and gives an extra stamp of approval to the winners – is that it's you, the people using these products day in, day out, who decide the results.

From sustainable activewear pioneers, to manufacturers of the home workout equipment that allows you to stay in shape from your own front room, the shortlists in these five categories represent the crème de la crème of the fitness world – and this is your chance to vote for your favourites.

The voting categories are as follows:

- Fitness retailer
- Home workout brand
- Activewear brand
- Sustainable fitness brand
- Fitness influencer

Head to smartsurvey.co.uk/s/MFHWA23 or scan the QR code below.



Scan here to
vote in the
Reader Awards









BAPTISM OF FIRE

Looking to test his physical and mental fortitude,
MF writer **Chris Carra** took on the notoriously
difficult Firefighter Selection Test





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Tension was building as we gathered for the confined spaces test. Confidence and agility are required here, and claustrophobia will be exposed

Milliseconds from ripping off my helmet and instantly ending my day, I forced myself to stop, take a breath and reassess. *You're stuck in a dark tunnel, I thought, in a room of tunnels, in a fire service training depot under the M4 interchange to Swansea...*

A few months before, applying to join the fire service had never crossed my mind. Now, disorientated and drenched in sweat, I was racing the clock to successfully complete the fifth test of seven on a long practical assessment day. Two months into the demanding fire service recruitment process, I was closer to accomplishing what tens of thousands want – and fail – to achieve each year.

Window of opportunity

Every year, fire and rescue services around the UK open their brief recruitment windows to be met with hundreds of hopeful applicants fighting for a handful of positions. In 2020, Shropshire Fire and Rescue Service received 1,047 applications for just six full-time positions, and it's a similar story across the country.

Call it an experiment or the beginning of a midlife crisis, but I decided to pause my writing career to embark on this process with Mid and West Wales Fire and Rescue Service.

The physical fitness and practical tests are famously tough, yet many fail to reach this stage. Every fire service is different, although the process begins with a registration. Thankfully, I had not committed any heinous crimes and I could spell my name correctly, so this was an easy pass. A few weeks later came the behavioural questionnaire and situational judgement test. Both are quite straightforward, although the latter – covering scenarios from safety at work to conflict resolution – has potential to trip you up. Even though it's multiple choice, there's not always an obvious answer. Take your time, use common sense and go with your gut.

After that, you're faced with the online assessments. These comprise three separate exams: verbal (English), numerical (maths) and mechanical reasoning (physics). I was confident enough with English... but maths and physics?

Gulp. Time to jump into some GCSE revision questions and a few mock exams. It's worth noting that despite the tests being performed at home, cheating shouldn't cross your mind – you'll sit similar tests again under exam conditions at the end of the process, should you progress to the interview stage. Cheats are always found out.

With the trio of exams passed, I was invited to a multi-stage fitness test – essentially the dreaded bleep

test. For the uninitiated, bleep tests are continuous shuttle runs between two markers set 20 metres apart. You must reach each marker before the bleep. With each passing level, the interval between bleeps decreases, so your speed needs to increase. Success at this stage relies on you reaching level 8.8, which is a total distance of around 1,400m and the equivalent of a VO_2 max of 42.3.

After driving for more than an hour, I arrived at a public gym in Haverfordwest and was siphoned into a registration room, where I finally met the competition. Even though there's no longer an upper age limit to applying, I was clearly one of the oldest there, at the grand age of 36. I wasn't too concerned, as I had practiced this test before and, on the day, I reached level 8.8 with puff to spare. Unfortunately, many candidates weren't as athletic as they thought. In fact, I heard of one person driving three hours that day to take the fitness test, only to drop out on the second level – less than two minutes of running. You can build up to level 8.8 in training using free apps, so don't waste your time unless you know you can get close to the mark.

The ultimate test

A few weeks later, it was time for the practical assessment day – the biggest physical and mental test of the process so far. On a brisk October morning, I pulled up to the training centre just outside Swansea. This isn't a day to take lightly, with seven tests to complete, designed to assess everything from your strength and stamina to your agility and dexterity. Adding to the pressure, you only have one crack at each of them. Fail any and your day – and the entire recruitment process – is instantly over.

After a classroom briefing, I was kitted out in full personal protective equipment (PPE) including the familiar tunic, helmet, boots and gloves. My small group was ushered into a yard filled with fire engines, ladders and burned-out cars for the first test.

The first three felt OK. There's the ladder extension test, where you pull a rope, loaded with around 30kg, vertically to simulate the extension and lowering of a 13.5m ladder. Strength is important here, but so is control.

Then comes the ladder lift, which tests upper-body strength and coordination. Holding a steel bar, you perform an underhand curl to your chest, switch your grip to overhand, perform a shoulder press, then lower it under control. The bar is loaded with 15kg, but with the weight of the equipment it's around 25kg in total.

Next, my favourite of the day: the casualty evacuation. Here, you pull a rather sad looking 55kg dummy backwards around a 30m course marked by cones and guided by an assessor. Sled pulls are great training for this, unless you have a willing mate who doesn't mind a few carpet burns. These three tests are all simple on paper, but require a bit of weight-lifting

experience, coordination and focus to complete. Remember, one wrong move and it's game over.

Head for heights

The remaining four tests were considerably more challenging. First up, the ladder climb. This assesses confidence at heights, as you not only climb a fully extended 13.5m ladder, but as you reach the top you have to lock your legs over the rungs and lean backwards, reading out a number on the ground. There's an art to correctly ascending and descending the ladder, and the leg lock feels a bit awkward, especially in clunky old boots. Good news: you do get to practice this manoeuvre at ground level to help avoid catastrophes higher up.

Tension was building as we gathered for the confined spaces test. Confidence and agility are required here, and claustrophobia will be exposed. I was called into the dark, dingy and humid building housing the purpose-built crawlway. Within a five-minute window, you have to negotiate your way through tight, snaking tunnels, over and under obstacles, while endlessly hitting your head on the ceiling (the helmet pays dividends here).

As you reach the assessor at the other side, the worst is still to come. Your vision is obscured with a mask, then it's time for the return journey. There's only one way through, but with no visual feedback and the constant threat of time running out, disorientation and panic can quickly set in. This is exactly what happened to me as I reached the end of one length. I pushed my hand in every direction. Dead end. There had to be a way through. Had I taken a wrong turn? I'd read a tip beforehand about keeping your left shoulder pinned to the wall to keep your bearings, yet I'd lost contact. Despite the urge to whip off my helmet, I composed myself and felt around one more time. Mercifully, I found a gap – I'd missed a semi-concealed tunnel to my right and managed to continue to the end in time.

Tunnel crawling was sobering, yet the equipment assembly test is where the vast majority of my group failed that day – and I was up next.

In an oil-stained workshop, I was greeted by a table with ten metal components that, when correctly assembled, would form a portable pump. It would be up to me to correctly assemble this pump within the time limit, in full PPE, dehydrated and in desperate need of an espresso. Luckily, I had watched several videos of this exact process in recent days and had partly memorised the procedure. Besides, you're given a demonstration and the table had





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I'd been working on my farmer's carries in the gym, and that work paid off as I carried hose reels, suction hoses and even a loaded barbell between the markers



step-by-step photos of the entire process. Six down, one more to go.

It came down to the equipment carry test: nearly six minutes of strength and aerobic fitness, which involved perpetually hauling heavy objects from a fire engine to a marker 25 metres away. I'd been working on my farmer's carries in the gym, and that work paid off as I carried hose reels, suction hoses and even a loaded barbell between the markers. Forget the

bleep test – after a long day, this is the real fitness test and required much digging in. Having successfully carried what seemed like a full fire engine of equipment between the markers, my day was over and I was officially physically fit and capable enough to become a firefighter.

Face to face

Success here results in an interview at fire service headquarters, where tunics are traded for two-piece suits and infinite tunnels are replaced with questions about your experience, skills and knowledge. I'd love to say the interview is a breeze compared to the practical

assessments, but it's just another difficult part of an already savage process. This is where 90% of my preparation went; there's no room for winging it here. Many books have been published on passing this process and I strongly recommend you grab one. For me, the interview went quite smoothly, largely down to my preparation. Then, after taking the verbal, numerical and mechanical exams again under exam



conditions in a classroom next door, the recruitment process was finally over.

A few weeks later, I received an email saying I'd been unsuccessful. No feedback, just a note thanking me for my interest. It stung a bit, as I felt I'd shown more than just interest. I called a friend who was a high-ranking member of the service to ask if they could dig up some insight. A week later, they told me I had actually passed the interview and was employable for the fire service, yet I didn't score high enough to make the final dozen. Brutal.

Ultimately, becoming a firefighter comes down to three things. Firstly,

intelligence: you don't need to be an academic, but you must know a little about how the world works. Secondly, physical ability: you can have a PhD in mechanical engineering, but unless you can climb a ladder without falling off you're effectively useless as a firefighter. Finally, determination: chances are you won't pass first time – like me, you can pass every stage, but still fail. Roughly 900 applied that summer, including myself, and only 12 were successful. If you want to make it in the service, you need to be willing to do this entire process multiple times. 🗣️

6 WAYS TO SUCCEED

How to pass the brutal selection process

1. Take the fitness test beforehand

Practise the bleep test by heading to a gym, sports hall or football pitch and mark out two cones separated by 20m. Many bleep test apps will take you to level 8.8 and beyond. If you can successfully achieve level 9 in training, then you can walk into the official test with full confidence.

2. Build functional strength and stamina

The practical assessment day requires good general strength and stamina. In the weeks building up to these tests, focus on farmer's walk variations, pull-downs, squats, lunges, sled drags, bicep curls and overhead presses. Work on your flexibility, agility and dexterity, too.

3. Know the process

The fire service entry process is similar across the UK, but different services include different protocols – for example, some also have a swimming test. Each service will list their processes online, so familiarise yourself beforehand. Some offer taster days, allowing you to try some of the tests in advance. If you can't do that, YouTube has multiple videos illustrating each test, so you know what's waiting for you.

4. Prepare for a long day

In the lead up to your practical assessment day, ensure you're well rested and hydrated. On the day, have a light breakfast with slow-release complex carbs. You may not get a chance to eat or drink during the assessments, so make sure you have enough in the tank beforehand (and give yourself enough time to digest your breakfast).

5. Do your research

Fitness aside, prepare yourself for the online ability assessments by brushing up on your verbal, numerical and mechanical reasoning. Use practice questions and fire service-specific mock exams with answer explanations, all easily found online. You will have to pay for many of these, but it's a worthy investment if you are serious about passing.

6. Put everything into the interview

If you reach the interview stage, congratulate yourself – you are in the top 10%. Yet failure at this stage is still very high. Give yourself the best chance at ticking all the boxes by buying or borrowing a book about the fire service interviews. Do this at least a month before the interview, as there's a lot to prepare.



FACING THE FEAR

Have you ever felt anxious at a gym? Does the thought of going to one fill you with dread? 'Gymtimidation', as [Ryan Hall](#) writes, is more common than you might think



In the 2022/23 UK Fitness Report, commissioned by Puregym, 56% of gym-goers revealed they suffered some form of gym-related anxiety.

Human nature is a broad science, and there is no hard and fast rule as to how anxiety affects each

individual. But for men in particular, the gym can be an intimidating place. A 2021 study, published in the journal *Wellbeing, Space and Society*, for example, found that men often try to out-compete each other in the gym to adhere to stereotypical masculine images, which can lead to increasingly toxic atmospheres.

While most of the men I spoke to identified with this narrative and worried about not being strong enough, I heard other, more nuanced stories. One man told me that he felt intimidated setting foot in a gym unless he was wearing the latest, branded gym clothing. Another told me that he knew he was



Men often try to out-compete each other in the gym to adhere to stereotypical masculine images

unfit, knew that going to a gym would lead to a healthier lifestyle, but wouldn't go because he was worried about being judged by others. A further theme that came through was not knowing how to use certain bits of equipment, or feeling stupid when having to ask how to set up a machine.

Anyone and everyone

Gymtimidation doesn't discriminate, either. Sam Shaw has been a PT for the last 12 years, as well as a professional fitness model. When I speak to him, he strikes me as a bright, bubbly, confident guy. He's clearly very knowledgeable and





LIFT OFF

New to weight lifting? Here's how to work out smarter *and* harder

1. Pick the right weights

If you're unsure of the weight to use on a given exercise, err slightly on the low side and concentrate on good form. As an example, assume you're aiming for 8-10 reps on shoulder press. If you hit 10 reps in your first set, increase the weight by around 5% at the next session. If you can't even get 8 reps in your first set, you've started too heavy. Drop the weight by 5-10% for your remaining sets. If you've only got one set of weights, pick a number of reps that means you're close to failure by the final move or slow the tempo.

2. Be flexible

If the gym's busy or your kit of choice is being used by others, you'll need a back-up option. There are alternatives for every move. Use a dumbbell for a kettlebell swing, for example, or the cable machine for the TRX biceps curl.

3. Log your lifts

At the very least, record the weights you're using, so you can aim to better them in your next workout. If you've got time, though, record how you felt during sessions, what extra activity you did and how you slept – it all helps.

4. Avoid distractions

If you're training at home, take your phone off the hook or set your mobile to airplane mode. Ring-fence the time you need to work out.

5. Push through

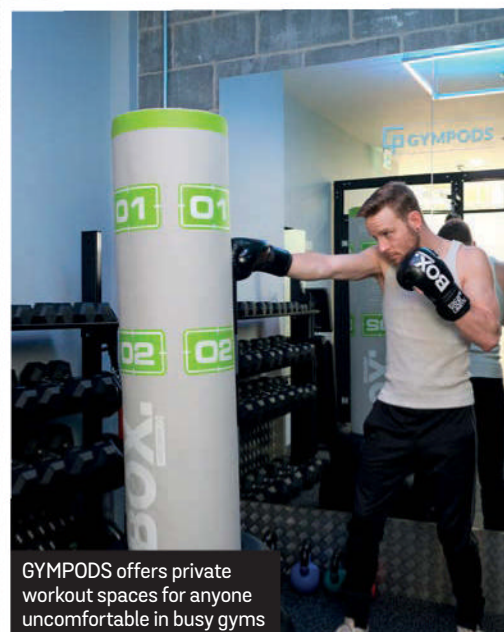
Everyone has bad days in the gym. Don't get discouraged if you are tired or can't lift more weight than last time. A top weightlifting tip for beginners is to stick to your plan, push yourself and you'll keep making progress.

passionate about his job. But he's also suffered from a form of gymtimidation.

"I was really overweight as a kid – and bullied for it," he says. To get into shape and stop his tormentors, he turned to sport – specifically rugby. He started to visit the gym, training hard, and lost a load of body fat – so much so that other members would ask his advice on losing weight and getting fit. That ignited his love for helping others and set him on the path to becoming a qualified PT. His online personal training service, Lemon Studios PT, was born nine years ago.

However, it wasn't long before gymtimidation began to rear its head. It all started after he'd trained for a fitness competition, dedicating his life to getting into the best shape he could. After the competition, when Shaw was back in the gym, he started to hear little comments from other members. They asked him whether he was in the bulking phase or had even given up competing. These remarks might seem innocent enough, but they had a profound effect. He soon felt under pressure to look a certain way, both as a competitor and PT.

"It got to a point where I was sat in the gym car park, thinking, *I don't want to do this*, so I just drove home," he says. In order to fight the anxiety and get back to doing what he loved, he had to strip back his own thoughts, feelings and attitudes to their component



GYMPODS offers private workout spaces for anyone uncomfortable in busy gyms

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Being scared of making mistakes is one of the biggest problems for men

Free running:
One of GYMPODS' treadmill rooms



Safe spaces

The good news is that gymtimidation can be fought. And while the new wave of fitness platforms represent one option – allowing you to stream a PT directly into your living room – there are alternatives

Simon Hayes and Liam Horne.

The concept is simple. There are 15 individual 'pods' in the gym, seven of which are dedicated to strength, two to HIIT, five to cardio and the last one to reformer Pilates. Users simply book which pod they want to use with an appropriate timeslot, shut the door behind them and get a workout away from prying eyes.

Being scared of making mistakes is one of the biggest problems for men. No one wants to be seen as a novice. But the very essence of learning is making those mistakes and reflecting on them. Throughout Crockett's long

parts. Once these were laid bare, he was able to delve into his own psychology and look for coping strategies.

"I wasn't even aware what anxiety was," he admits. "Previously, I thought I was invincible."

for those who still want to leave the house.

GYMPODS is a stone's throw from Kingsland High Street in Hackney, East London. Mike Crockett, who has over 25 years' experience in the fitness industry, is the co-founder, along with

career, he's seen many users who've suffered from gymtimidation, and he believes GYMPODS is the perfect antidote: "You can train in an open space where you can get things wrong."

Find the fun

Frank Sinclair is the owner of Fit with Frank, specialising in personal training and online fitness programmes. He has over 20 years' experience in the fitness industry. We speak about gym-related anxiety and the extreme effect it can have on people. He tells me it's one of the reasons he started Fit with Frank:

"It was made to connect with people who hadn't been in the gym for years. Many people have a negative image of what a gym's like. By breaking down those barriers, people open up to exercising."

We talk about the obstacles men face, and he's quick to speak about the part social media has to play, with many men feeling that some of the physiques they see on various platforms aren't realistically attainable.

It's something that Crockett agrees with, telling me there's "a huge amount

of judgement online," which only acts to enhance the problem of gymtimidation.

I ask Sinclair about how he advises his clients to overcome it. "Day one, just get in there," he says. "Get on a bike, which is safer because you can sit down and hit quick start."

It also pays to remember the basics of a gym and why they exist. "Every gym is different, but the essence is to move your body in some way," adds Sinclair.

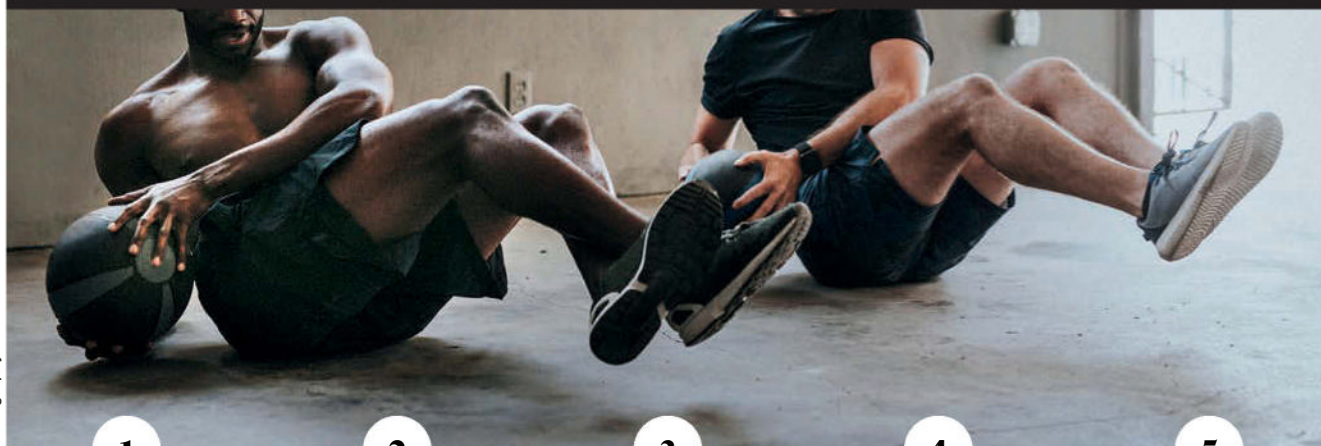
He doesn't advocate the use of technology, though – especially for someone who's new to the gym environment – because it can lead to confusion. Throughout our conversation, we circle back to simplicity. Once you have mastered the basics and can feel your comfort levels rising, you can branch out.

"Gyms are playgrounds," he says. "They need to be explored." And he's quick to point out that most people are too busy with their own workouts to worry about what others are doing.

"No one is perfect in the gym," he adds. "Once you realise that, you'll feel a lot better." 🍌

HOW TO COPE

Five ways to overcome gymtimidation



1

Just do it

Starting can be hard, so set yourself achievable goals. Small objectives like simply going to the gym for the first time, or using a new piece of equipment, are good ways to get the ball rolling.

2

Buddy up

Training with a mate is an effective way to overcome fear. Being with a friendly face is a real confidence booster.

3

Seek home comforts

If you'd rather stay in, subscribe to an online class. You'll still get a solid workout, but in the comfort of your own home.

4

And expert help

Unsure how to use a piece of equipment? No idea which exercises to do? Ask a member of staff for help. They'll be happy to assist.

5

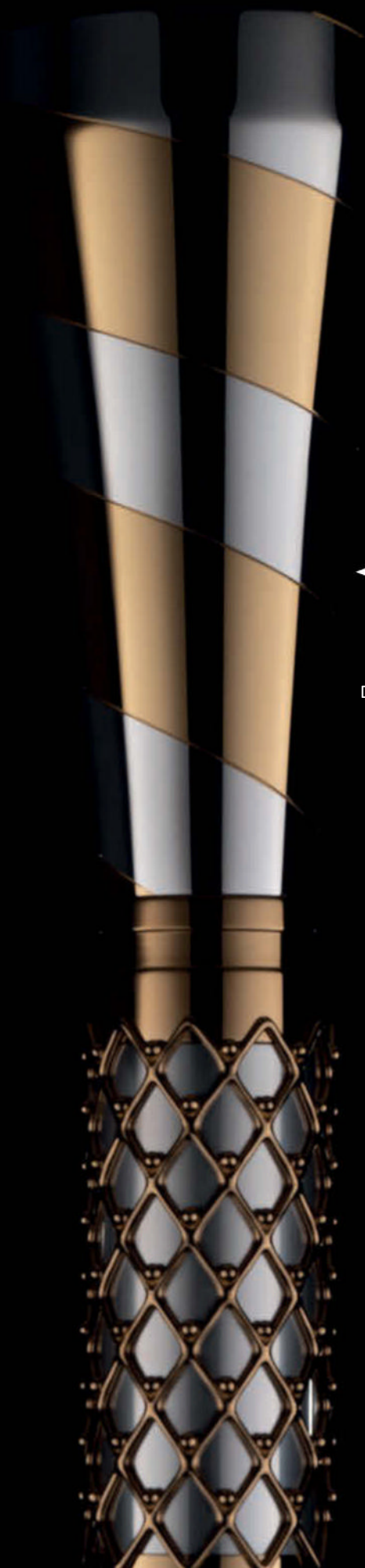
Don't overthink it

Your fitness journey is personal to you. Don't worry about the guy lifting heavy weights, or the bloke pounding the treadmill. They've all had to start somewhere, just as you have.

**“PLEASE FIGHT FOR
MENTAL HEALTH.
THE SUPPORT IS JUST
NOT THERE”**

How Baton of Hope is aiming to eradicate the stigma of suicide





The Baton of Hope
Designed to be the biggest
suicide awareness and
prevention initiative the
UK has ever seen

These are the words of Ross McCarthy, taken from a farewell letter he wrote to his family before his death by suicide in February 2021. McCarthy had been suffering with severe depression for ten years and had been placed on a six-month waiting list for therapy. He died two weeks into the wait.

Despite the devastation caused by McCarthy's death, his final words have been used as inspiration by his dad, Mike McCarthy, to create Baton of Hope, the biggest suicide awareness and prevention initiative the UK has ever seen. A tour of 12 UK cities, starting on Sunday 25 June in Glasgow before reaching Downing Street in London on 6 July, the Baton will be carried by those who have lost loved ones to suicide. The Baton itself has been crafted by silversmiths Thomas Lyte, known for

making the FA Cup and Ryder Cup trophies. The aim, explains McCarthy, a former TV reporter, is to draw attention to a subject that remains taboo, while also honouring his son's dying wish.

"The fact that he wanted to do something, and to improve something, was typical of Ross," says Mike. "He cared about other people. He especially cared about other people with mental health issues."

"There is no conversation"

The statistics about suicide in the UK make for disturbing reading. It is the leading cause of death among those aged under 35, with an average of 17 suicides occurring every day. There were 5,583 suicides registered in England and Wales alone in 2021. Three quarters of all deaths by suicide are men.

"There have been enormous advances in the openness surrounding discussions to do with mental health, driven largely by the younger

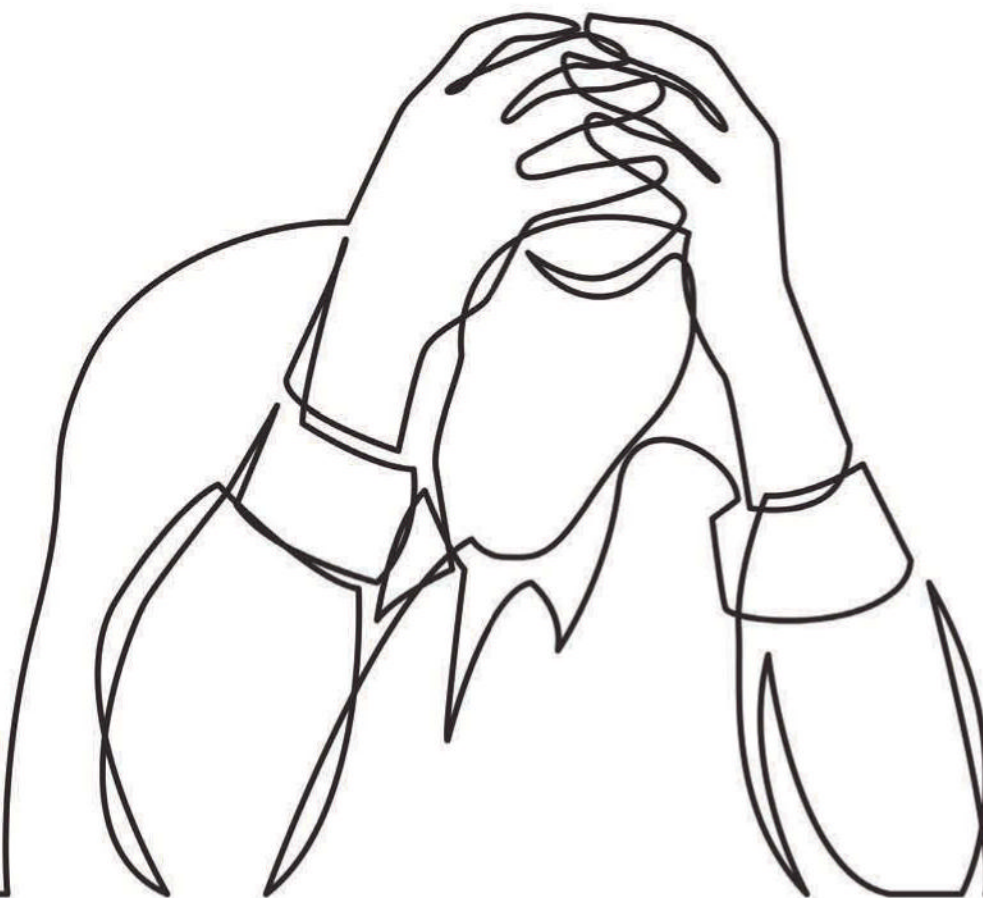
generation," says McCarthy. However, when it comes to suicide, there still seems to be a deep reluctance to talk.

"With suicide, there is no conversation," he adds. "There is no public discourse, there is no political debate. There are no lessons in the classroom. There are no lectures."

It's a view reiterated by Ged Flynn, CEO of Papyrus, a charity dedicated to preventing suicide in young people:

"We know that if we talk openly and safely about suicide that we create and engender hope. But the prevalent myth, which is very, very deeply held within us, is that if we talk about suicide, we will cause it."

Flynn explains that talking safely about suicide means asking people how they feel, asking again and, importantly, asking directly if they are planning to take their own life. Unsafe approaches include discussing methods, which can lead to imitative behaviours. The key, he adds, is to normalise suicidal



“I knew exactly what I was trying to do. It was a suicide attempt”

George Sullivan’s story

When George Sullivan returned to university in the autumn of 2020, after a year spent working on placement, his mental health was deteriorating. Having struggled with his wellbeing as a child at an all-boys school, where he was a victim of bullying, and then turning to drugs when he became a student, the shift to online learning during that Covid-hit period proved to be particularly

challenging. Following a night out with friends, Sullivan experienced a drug-induced psychotic episode and attempted to take his own life.

“I essentially dissociated,” he explains. “I was so disconnected from myself and suffered from derealisation, meaning I thought that life wasn’t real. And the only way to escape that was to end my own life.”

Despite that, he was back studying within weeks:

“I tried to fool everyone and say, ‘It was just a freak incident on drugs, I’m completely fine.’ I was so embarrassed and ashamed of what had happened. I knew exactly what I was trying to do. It was a suicide attempt.”

Having achieved a first-class degree the following summer, Sullivan found his issues rearing up once more, without the purpose of study. Once again, he had to go to A&E, following an incident of self harm on a night out.

“It was actually in A&E where the nurse sat me down and asked me what had happened, and if I was really OK. She asked that, compassionately, two or three times. That’s when I broke down and told

them everything. It was two weeks before my 23rd birthday, and at that point I was planning to end my life on my birthday.”

Sullivan had to spend 36 hours in A&E before staff could find him a bed in a psychiatric unit, where he was placed on 24-hour suicide watch. He spent two weeks there and was given the antidepressant sertraline which, he says, helped the ‘dark clouds’ to part:

“I had more energy. It was pretty incredible to feel so low and then start to actually feel some sort of hope.”

Sullivan was able to access private psychotherapy and has since undergone EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing) therapy, to help him with traumatic events from his school days.

He now has his own podcast, Sully’s Open Conversation, in which he talks to those who have dealt with suicidal thoughts, as well as experts in the field.

“There are a lot of messages of hope,” he says. “We talk about what guests do to keep mindful and stay on top of their mental health, managing those thoughts and emotions.”

thoughts, so much so that the conversation can open up among more and more people.

“It’s quite normal and common for people to think, *Life is so tough, I’d be better off ending it*. That’s not to encourage it, it’s just to acknowledge that feeling. As soon as somebody says, ‘I’ve had thoughts of suicide,’ it enables someone else to say, ‘Well, I’ve thought that, too.’”

“

Talking safely about suicide means asking people how they feel, asking again, and asking directly if they are planning to take their own life

Ripple effect

For Jenny Rayner, the normalisation of suicidal thoughts is vital. She runs The Lucy Rayner Foundation – named after her daughter, who she lost to suicide in 2012 – and is working with McCarthy on Baton of Hope.

“The ripple effect from a suicide is far reaching – it touches so many people,” she says. “Instead of it being a taboo subject, we need to normalise it and say that, you know, at some point in everyone’s life, they will think about it. Because no life is linear. We go up and down with our mental health. Life happens, and some of it isn’t good.”

One of Rayner’s gravest concerns is around access to care. As highlighted by Ross McCarthy’s long wait for therapy, NHS mental health provision is in the midst of a deep crisis.

“People in crisis don’t get the immediate care that they need,” says Rayner, “and they have to fall back on

Third Sector charities like mine, but we don’t have the funding.”

Ged Flynn, too, is extremely worried about the lack of resources for those struggling with suicidal ideation. “Since Covid, we’ve had an exponential increase in two things: anxiety and the absence of a mental health service that used to be there,” he says. Flynn remarks that for one London NHS Trust, its current target is to get its waiting list down to ten months for access to treatment. For those in crisis, that’s ten months too long.

“In Covid, we suddenly found money because it was important. If we’re saying at the moment we can’t find money [for suicide prevention], we’re saying it’s not important. It’s untenable. Any politician who says we haven’t got the money is actually saying, we don’t have the will. Whatever your politics, if we can afford to protect this country with Trident [nuclear deterrent], we can





BATON OF HOPE

The Baton of Hope will tour the UK on the following dates:

Glasgow - Sunday 25 June

Edinburgh - Monday 26 June

Newcastle - Tuesday 27 June

Sheffield - Wednesday 28 June

Manchester - Thursday 29 June

Belfast - Friday 30 June

Cardiff - Saturday 1 July

Bristol - Sunday 2 July

Birmingham - Monday 3 July

Milton Keynes - Tuesday 4 July

Brighton - Wednesday 5 July

London - Thursday 6 July



Thomas Lyte CEO, Kevin Baker – the silversmiths who crafted the Baton



Mike McCarthy with the Baton of Hope

afford to double the investment into children's mental health."

Aiming for zero suicide

"It's going to take a long time to put right, and it may not be in my lifetime, but most of the experts, the clinicians, accept that suicide is preventable," says Mike McCarthy. "The question is, 'Well, why aren't we preventing them?' Because the figures have stagnated for more than 15 years."

Along with Rayner and the team at Baton of Hope, McCarthy has put together workplace and education charters, designed to deliver training around suicide prevention. These were presented in the Houses of Parliament in May 2023. So far, 85 MPs from across all parties have signed up to the Baton of Hope campaign, suggesting politicians may at last be willing to spend political capital on an issue that does not discriminate. In a speech in May, Labour leader Keir Starmer said it was his 'mission' to reduce suicide figures within five years, if his party wins the next General Election.

McCarthy, though, says that the wider aim of the Baton of Hope is to create a zero suicide society: "If suicide is preventable, then we shouldn't say, 'Let's have a 10% reduction, let's have

a 20% reduction.' Why can't we aim at least towards a zero suicide society?"

"We want you to talk"

Bringing the number of suicides down requires not only a change in policy, but also a fundamental shift in how everyone approaches suicidal thoughts – whether they're having them themselves or looking to help others.

"We all have a role to play," says Mike McCarthy, "whether you're at the top of government helping to formulate suicide prevention strategy, or you're texting a mate to say, 'How are you really?'"

Jenny Rayner says if you're struggling with suicidal ideation, the key is speak with someone you trust: "If that person is of trust, and they love you, they will support you in getting the help that you need. Because sometimes when you get to that place, thinking, *I really don't want to be here anymore*, it's hard to go and get the support, it's hard to take yourself to the GP. You need somebody to say, 'It's going to be OK, I'm here for you.'"

"The one thing that unites everybody who takes their own life is loss of hope," adds McCarthy. "We want you to talk. Please don't feel it's something that makes you less of a man or less of a person. We need you to talk, because the world is ready to listen." **OF**

SUPPORT

Struggling with suicidal thoughts? These services can help

Papyrus

Contact Papyrus' HOPELINE247 by calling 0800 068 4141. You can also text 07860 039967 or email pat@papyrus-uk.org

The Lucy Rayner Foundation

Free counselling available for 14-39 year olds. Call 01737 910 907 or visit thelucyraynerfoundation.com

Samaritans

Call Samaritans free on 116 123 or email jo@samaritans.org. You can also have an online chat at samaritans.org, write them a letter, or use the Samaritans self-help app.

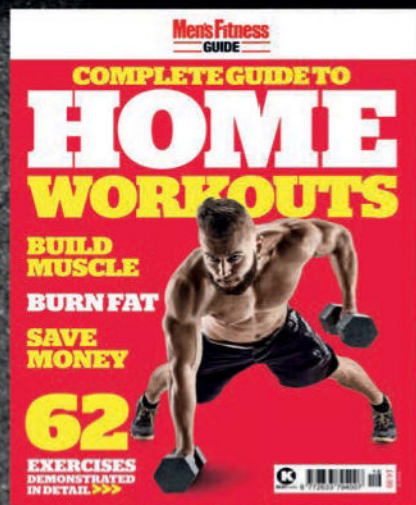
Stay Alive app

Available for iPhone and Android, Stay Alive is a pocket suicide prevention resource, including a safety plan, the ability to customise reasons for living and a memory box where you can upload photos to bring a sense of hope.

Words: Joe Milihane | Photography: batonofhopeuk.org

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FUEL

BITE THE BULLET

If you're bored of sickly energy gels and brick-like bars, writes *MF's* editor Isaac Williams, these might be just the ticket

With its two flavours of 'energy chews' (the original Mintense and the new Chocolit Orange), Caffeine Bullet - the creation of ultra-endurance athlete David Hellard - is an excellent alternative to more traditional fatigue-fighting energy-boosters.

Each chew (only slightly bigger than a piece of chewing gum) contains 100mg of caffeine, which is roughly equivalent to

a double shot of coffee. But because it's absorbed through your saliva as you chew, so the science goes, it's absorbed up to three times faster than gels or drinks.

Easy to digest

The taste is fine - a bit bitter, but perfectly palatable - which might not sound particularly glowing, but when you're in the pain cave midway through a run and your

lungs are threatening imminent explosion, too much flavour can be a bad thing. They're easy to get down, too, with a little of that namesake chewiness made manageable by their miniature size.

If there's one downside, it's how difficult these can be to get into, particularly an hour into a long run when the chew has half-baked itself onto the wrapper. But while the process of clawing and biting your way

in could be made smoother, ultimately Caffeine Bullet's near-instant impact is worth the slight effort involved.

As someone who a) enjoys running, but also b) struggles to stomach most high-sugar energy gels, I've used these on every long-ish run for the last few months. They provide a noticeable lift and are easy to take on board when you're close to empty.



TRY FOR YOURSELF

Caffeine Bullet
Chocolit Orange
Energy Chews
£12.99 (4 packets
/ 16 chews),
caffeinebullet.com

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Build muscle, burn fat and boost strength



TRAINING TIPS

Expert advice for hitting your goals



NUTRITION

Recipes, food hacks and meal plans



MENTAL HEALTH

Support and strategies for improved wellbeing



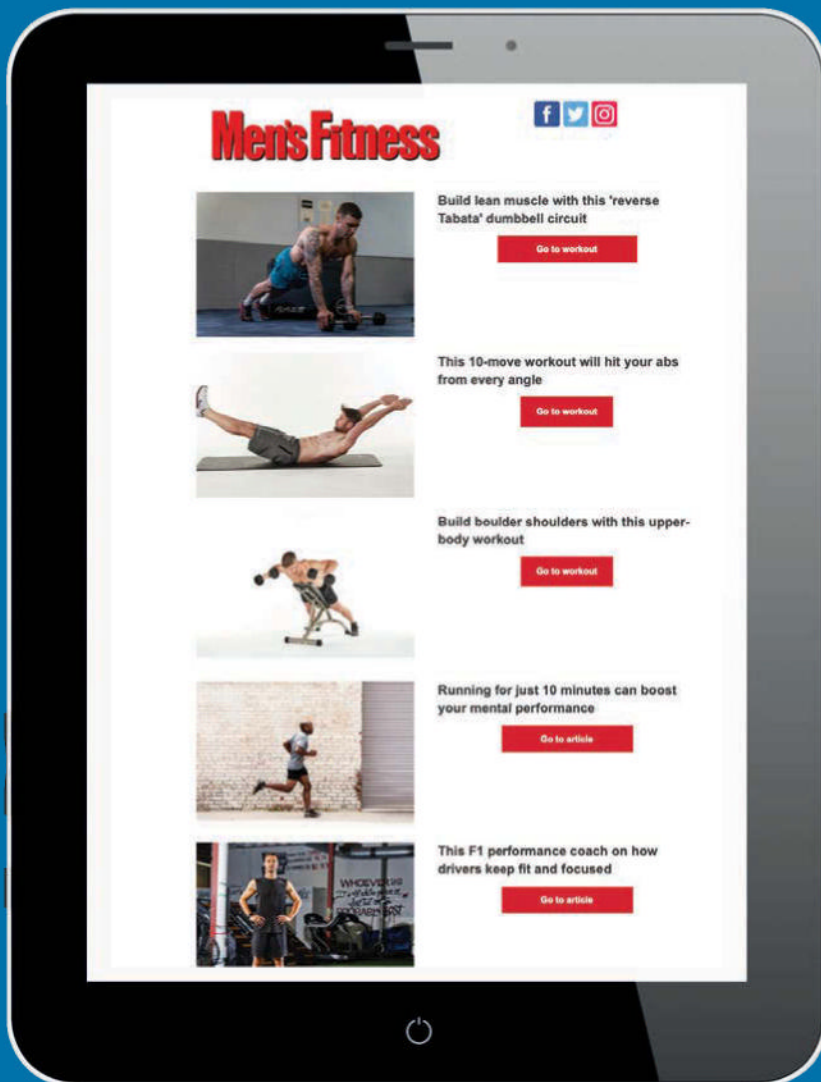
INTERVIEWS

Exclusive insights from the big names in fitness



PRODUCTS

Tried and tested tech, equipment and apparel



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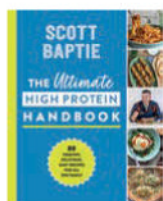
MUSCLE MEALS

Ramp up post-workout recovery with these recipes from nutritionist Scott Baptie's *The Ultimate High Protein Handbook*

My aim is to make healthy eating as easy as possible for you. Which means cutting through the nutrition nonsense, forgoing the fads and showing you how to eat well, without listening to the 'noise' about all the foods you should supposedly avoid.

The Ultimate High Protein Handbook is for people who want to enjoy easy, high-protein, family-friendly recipes without spending hours slaving in the kitchen or hunting down obscure ingredients you can't find in the supermarket. I've seen so many healthy cookbooks that get the green from me when I'm wearing my nutritionist hat, but sadly get a big red cross when it comes to practicality, flavour and all-round pleasure.

Nobody really has the time to cook two meals an evening – a 'healthy' meal for yourself and then something else that the kids or your other half will actually eat – because otherwise the healthy option is kale, kale and more kale. Wouldn't it be much easier if the healthy meal was actually one that everyone wanted to eat? In our household, we serve one meal at dinner time. It's always nutritious – protein-packed and flavoursome – it doesn't take hours to prepare, and my wife and our three-year-old love it. We all eat the same thing – the only thing that needs to be changed is the portion size. ➤➤



Recipes and text extracted from *The Ultimate High Protein Handbook* by Scott Baptie (HarperNorth, £20 hardback, harpercollins.co.uk)





PER SERVING
Kcals: 374 Protein: 43g
Carbs: 10g Fat: 18g

LIGHTER TUSCAN CHICKEN

This is so rich and creamy, you'll be amazed to find it comes in at under 400 calories per portion. I've played around with the familiar recipe and come up with a version that's just as tasty and loads healthier. The wine isn't essential in this dish, so you could drop it and use extra stock if you prefer.

Prep time: 10 minutes
Cook time: 30 minutes

INGREDIENTS (serves 4):

- 1 tsp onion powder
- 1 tsp garlic powder
- 1 tsp paprika
- 1 tsp olive oil
- 1 tbsp water
- Black pepper
- 500g chicken breast
- 1 tsp butter
- 1 red onion, finely chopped
- 2 garlic cloves, crushed
- 100g cherry tomatoes, quartered
- 100ml white wine
- 30g sun-dried tomato pesto
- 1 tsp mixed herbs
- 150ml chicken stock
- 70ml double cream
- 30g low-fat cheddar cheese
- Handful of fresh basil
- 100g spinach leaves, washed and trimmed

METHOD:

- 1.** Mix the onion powder, garlic powder, paprika, olive oil, water and black pepper in a bowl, and add the chicken breasts. Get your hands in and make sure the chicken breasts are fully covered in the mixture.
- 2.** Heat a large frying pan on a medium heat and add the butter. Add the chicken to the pan and fry until brown on all sides. It doesn't need to be fully cooked through at this stage.
- 3.** Remove the chicken from the pan, set aside and add the onion, garlic and tomatoes. Fry until the tomatoes start to break down and the onion begins to brown.
- 4.** Add the wine and reduce by half. Return the chicken to the pan with the pesto, mixed herbs and chicken stock, and simmer for 5-7 minutes.
- 5.** Add the double cream, cheddar, basil and spinach to the pan, and mix through until the spinach wilts.



PEANUT CHICKEN

This is like a satay, but not so nutty and tomatoey. As you'll see, the method has just two steps, so that on its own makes this a winner - especially if you're looking for a midweek time-saver. This recipe can easily be scaled up if your slow cooker is big enough. If you don't have a slow cooker, fear not. You can cook it like a casserole in the oven, at 160°C (140°C fan) for a few hours, doubling the chopped tomatoes or adding about 500ml stock. Enjoy!

Prep time: 10 minutes

Cook time: 5 hours

INGREDIENTS (serves 6):

- 1kg chicken breasts, diced
- 1 onion, diced
- 2 garlic cloves, crushed
- 120g peanut butter (crunchy or smooth)
- 1 tbsp cornflour
- 400g tin chopped tomatoes
- 1 red chilli, deseeded
- 1 tbsp lime juice
- 1 tbsp curry powder
- 2 tbsp soy sauce

METHOD:

1. Throw all of the ingredients into the slow cooker.

2. Cover and cook on low for 5 hours.

PER SERVING

Kcals: 329 Protein: 43g

Carbs: 10g Fat: 13g







PER SERVING

Kcals: 479 Protein: 53g

Carbs: 7g Fat: 7g



MEDITERRANEAN BAKED FISH

This will bring back lovely summer holiday memories of sun-drenched lunches and sunset dinners beside the sea. It's colourful, delicious and one of the best ways to get a big protein hit.

Prep time: 10 minutes + 30 minutes to marinate
Cook time: 40-50 minutes

INGREDIENTS (serves 4):

- 1kg skinned firm white fish fillets (eg. haddock or cod), cut into large chunks
- Juice of 1 lemon
- 1 tbsp olive oil
- 3 onions, thinly sliced
- 4 garlic cloves, crushed
- 900g ripe tomatoes, chopped
- 2 tbsp tomato purée
- Pinch of sugar
- Pinch of chilli flakes
- 1 tsp dried oregano
- 120ml red wine
- 12 black, pitted olives
- Handful of fresh flat-leaf parsley, chopped
- 800g boiled potatoes
- Salt and pepper

METHOD:

- 1.** Put the fish in a large ovenproof baking dish. Drizzle with the lemon juice, and season with salt and pepper. Cover and set aside to marinate in a cool place for 30 minutes.
- 2.** Preheat the oven to 180°C (160°C fan).
- 3.** Heat the oil in a large frying pan set over a low to medium heat. Cook the onion and garlic, stirring occasionally, for 8-10 minutes or until tender. Add the tomatoes, tomato purée, sugar, chilli flakes, oregano and wine. Cook, uncovered, for 10-15 minutes until the sauce thickens and reduces. Stir in the olives and most of the parsley.
- 4.** Pour the sauce over the fish and bake in the preheated oven for 20-25 minutes, or until the fish is cooked and opaque. Sprinkle with the remaining parsley and serve immediately with boiled potatoes.

STIR-FRIED CRISPY TOFU

This vegan stir-fry is great for a quick supper when you get home from work. Tofu is a healthy source of plant protein. It's low in fat and carbs, but packed with essential minerals, especially iron and calcium.

Prep time: 15 minutes

Cook time: 10-12 minutes

INGREDIENTS (serves 4):

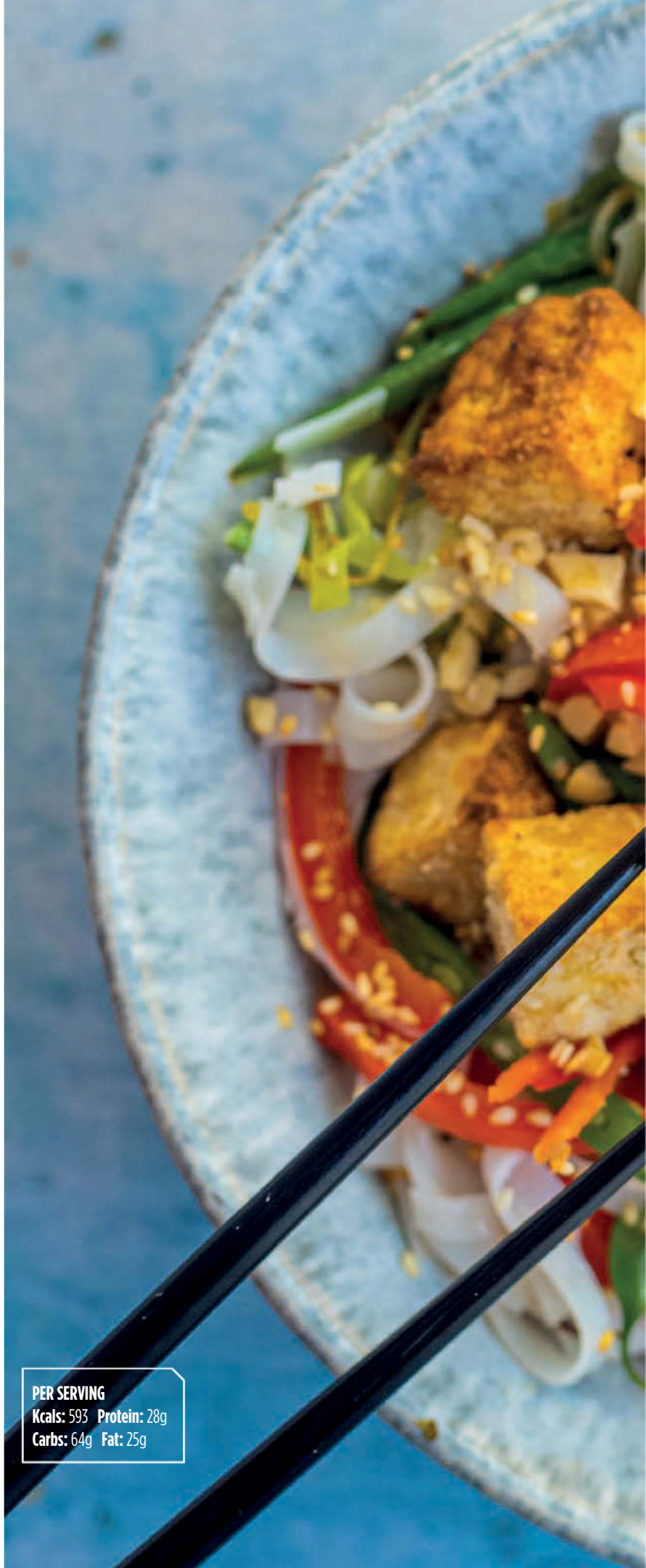
- 600g firm tofu, drained and cubed (always use firm tofu for stir-fries, as it keeps its shape)
- 3 tbsp cornflour
- 2 tbsp coconut oil
- 2.5cm piece of ginger, peeled and grated
- 3 garlic cloves, thinly sliced
- 1 hot red chilli, shredded
- Bunch of spring onions, thinly sliced
- 2 red peppers, thinly sliced
- 150g fine green beans, trimmed
- 2 pak choi, cut into quarters lengthways
- 500g fresh, ready-to-cook rice noodles
- 4 tbsp dark soy sauce
- Juice of 1 lime
- 4 tbsp roasted salted peanuts, chopped
- Sesame seeds, for sprinkling
- Salt and pepper

METHOD:

1. Pat the tofu dry with kitchen paper and lightly dust with cornflour that's been seasoned with salt and pepper. Heat the oil in a wok or a deep frying pan set over a medium to high heat, and stir-fry the tofu in batches for 4-5 minutes, until crispy and golden. Remove and drain on kitchen paper. Keep warm.
2. Reduce the heat to medium and stir-fry the ginger, garlic, chilli and spring onion for 1 minute. Add the peppers and green beans, and stir-fry for 2-3 minutes.
3. Add the pak choi and noodles, and stir-fry for 2-3 minutes, or until the noodles are heated through and the pak choi is just tender, but still a little crisp. Toss with the soy sauce and lime juice.
4. Divide between four shallow bowls and top with the crispy tofu and peanuts. Sprinkle with the sesame seeds and serve piping hot. 🍴

PER SERVING

Kcals: 593 Protein: 28g
Carbs: 64g Fat: 25g





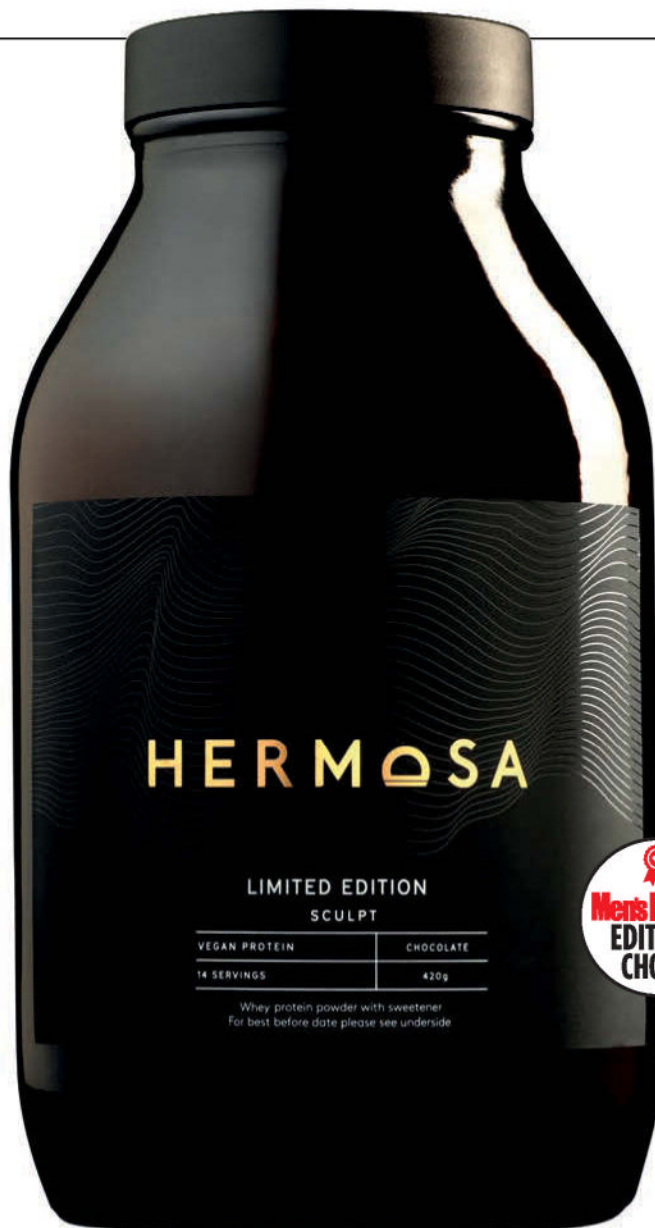
WHEY TO GO

The best whey protein powders to maximise post-workout recovery

Protein powders offer a convenient and measured way to consume protein, ensuring a good balance of amino acids to support muscle protein synthesis after training. There are many types, but they can all be broadly categorised into either milk-based (whey) or plant-based.

While the range of plant-based powders is now extensive, with some excellent options for anyone who doesn't want to consume animal protein, this issue we're focusing on whey. Quickly digested and generally well tolerated, it remains the most popular choice in the UK. But with hundreds of products to choose from, picking the right powder for you is no mean feat.

Which is why - with the help of leading sports nutritionist Rob Hobson - we've rounded up our favourite options on the market right now...



Hermosa Whey Protein Powder

£67 for 1kg (33 servings) / livehermosa.com

Hermosa is a right-on brand that makes protein products that are ethically sourced, sustainable and with non-GMO ingredients. While it's pretty costly, its whey protein powder is the purest, smoothest and tastiest on test. There's no cloying sweetness or bitter aftertaste: just a delicious chocolate or vanilla shake that you'll find yourself doing extra sessions just to get another serving of.

Texture: ★★★★★ Solubility: ★★★★★ Effectiveness: ★★★★★ OVERALL: ★★★★★

Pros:

- ✓ Nice flavour
- ✓ Ethically sourced
- ✓ Not too sweet

Cons:

- ✗ Expensive
- ✗ Limited sizes and flavours
- ✗ Only available online

Protein per serving: 21g

Cost per serving: £2.03

Sizes: 10 x 30g / 420g / 1kg

Flavours: Chocolate / Vanilla

Healthspan Elite All Blacks Ultimate Whey Protein Blend

£32.99 for 750g (20 servings) / healthspanelite.co.uk

As the name suggests, this is the protein powder of the all-conquering All Blacks. That's a team that takes both performance and recovery seriously, so you can be confident this powder is the business. Flavours are rich but nicely balanced, it's made with digestive enzymes and is Informed Sport-approved – so suitable for elite competition.

Texture: ★★★★★ Solubility: ★★★★★

Effectiveness: ★★★★★ OVERALL: ★★★★★

Pros:

- ✓ Rich flavour, but not too sweet
- ✓ Contains digestive enzymes
- ✓ Informed Sport-approved

Cons:

- ✗ Quite expensive
- ✗ Only available online
- ✗ Only one size available

Protein per serving: 24g

Cost per serving: £1.65

Size: 750g

Flavours: Chocolate / Strawberry / Vanilla



Innermost The Strong Protein

£29.95 for 520g (13 servings)

liveinnermost.com

With a substantial 34g protein per serving, Innermost's The Strong Protein will take care of your recovery needs. It's a smooth, creamy shake that's low in sugar – though the most expensive on test. One to save for your hardest sessions.

Texture: ★★★★★ Solubility: ★★★★★

Effectiveness: ★★★★★ OVERALL: ★★★★★

Pros:

- ✓ Pleasant flavour
- ✓ Low in sugar
- ✓ Natural ingredients

Cons:

- ✗ Only one size
- ✗ Claims for fat loss a little exaggerated
- ✗ Expensive

Protein per serving: 34g

Cost per serving: £2.30

Size: 520g

Flavours: Chocolate / Vanilla

Protein Works Whey Protein 80 Concentrate

£24.99 for 500g (20 servings)

theproteinworks.com

Protein Works' shake has the fewest calories (99kcal) of any powder on test. It delivers 20g protein per 25g serving and is silky smooth once mixed. With four different sizes and 14 flavours to choose from, you're bound to find an option to suit you.

Texture: ★★★★★ Solubility: ★★★★★

Effectiveness: ★★★★★ OVERALL: ★★★★★

Pros:

- ✓ Rich flavour
- ✓ Large variety of pack sizes

Cons:

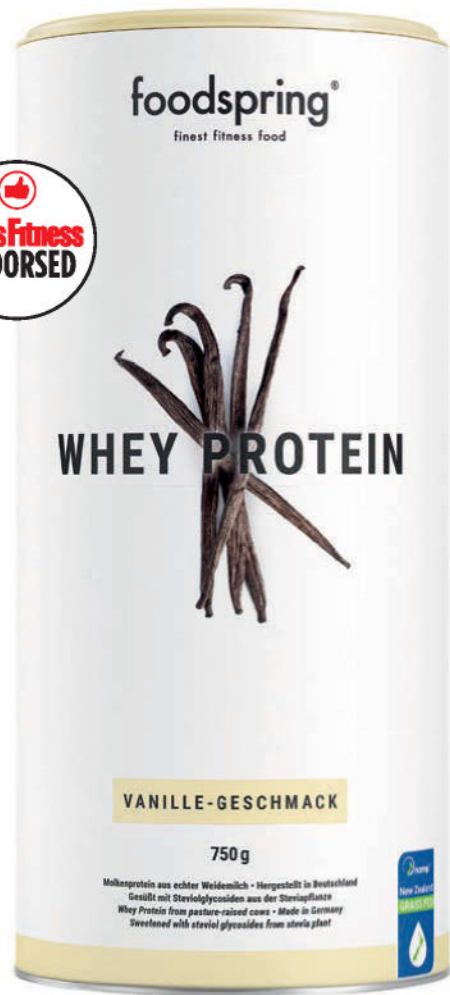
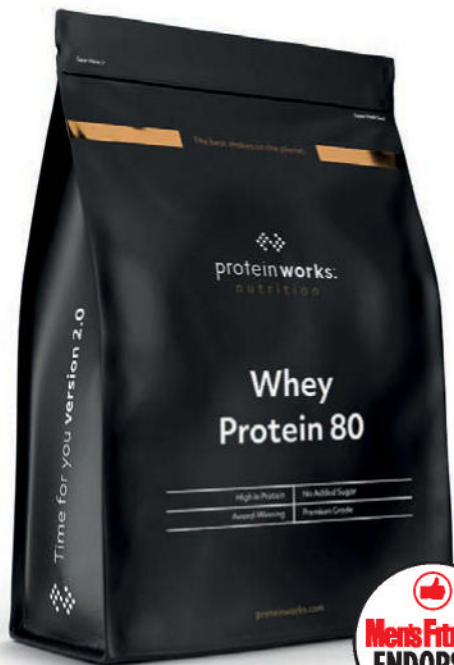
- ✗ Packaging is not 100% recyclable
- ✗ May be too sweet for some

Protein per serving: 20g

Cost per serving: £1.25

Sizes: 500g / 1kg / 2kg / 4kg

Flavours: 14 available



foodspring Whey Protein

£29.99 for 750g (25 servings)

foodspring.co.uk

foodspring's protein powder is another great-tasting shake, which is low in sugar, fat and calories. It's good value, too, with 25 servings per 750g bag – each delivering 24g protein. It's available in five flavours, although only in one size (750g). On the plus side, the tub is fully recyclable.

Texture: ★★★★★ Solubility: ★★★★★

Effectiveness: ★★★★★ OVERALL: ★★★★★

Pros:

- ✓ Five distinctive flavours
- ✓ Wide range and amount of BCAAs
- ✓ Good value

Cons:

- ✗ No scoop
- ✗ Slightly bitter aftertaste from the sweetener
- ✗ Only available in one size and no option to bulk buy

Protein per serving: 24g

Cost per serving: £1.20

Size: 750g

Flavours: Chocolate / Vanilla / Strawberry / Cookies and Cream / Coconut Crisp

Optimum Nutrition Gold Standard 100% Whey Protein

£32.99 for 896g (28 servings) / [optimumnutrition.com](https://www.optimumnutrition.com)

Optimum Nutrition's Gold Standard shake is widely available in health food stores, in sizes from 300g to 4.54kg. You've got 12 flavours plus an unflavoured variety to choose from, and both pouch and tub versions are 100% recyclable.

Texture: ★★★★★ Solubility: ★★★★★

Effectiveness: ★★★★★ OVERALL: ★★★★★

Pros:

- ✓ Good flavours
- ✓ Low in calories and sugar
- ✓ Good value for money and widely available

Cons:

- ✗ A little too sweet
- ✗ Thin when mixed with water
- ✗ Contains artificial sweeteners

Protein per serving: 24g

Cost per serving: £1.18

Sizes: 300g / 310g / 450g / 465g / 896g / 908g / 2.27kg / 4.54kg

Flavours: 12, plus unflavoured versions available



Kinetica Whey Protein

£38.99 for 1kg (33 servings)

[uk.kineticasport.com](https://www.uk.kineticasport.com)

Another good choice for elite athletes, Kinetica's whey protein is Informed Sport-approved. Its 1kg tubs are good value, but you can bulk buy in 2.27kg or 4kg tubs for extra savings. The five flavours on offer are gluten-free and suitable for vegetarians.

Texture: ★★★★★ Solubility: ★★★★★

Effectiveness: ★★★★★ OVERALL: ★★★★★

Pros:

- ✓ Grass-fed and hormone-free whey protein
- ✓ Good value
- ✓ Informed Sport-approved for athletes

Cons:

- ✗ Slightly sweet and synthetic taste
- ✗ Texture is a little thin
- ✗ Weaker taste than others

Protein per serving: 34g

Cost per serving: £2.30

Size: 520g

Flavours: Chocolate / Vanilla

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▶ YOUR BLUEPRINT FOR SUCCESS TRAINER

5 WAYS TO MAXIMISE WORKOUT TIME

1. Stretch wisely

Static stretching can shock cold muscles, risking injury and depleting muscle strength by up to 30%. Instead, limber up with a little light cardio and some dynamic mobility moves to raise your heart rate and flush your muscles with oxygen. Save static poses for your cool-down.

2. Turn up the music

Studies show that some gym-goers who listen to music put in up to 10% more effort without realising it. For the best results, choose tracks with a beat that matches the pace of your workout. Optimal exercise music is between 135 and 190 beats per minute.

3. Check your posture

Perfect posture – in general, shoulders open and relaxed, spine straight and core muscles engaged – ensures you target the right muscles and work to your capacity. It's also essential to prevent injury, particularly lower back strain. Before any dynamic movement, remember this posture drill: move shoulder blades out and down. And never hold your breath during a lifting exercise – breathe in deeply as you prepare for the move and breathe out through pursed lips as you lift.

4. Do more in less time

Make every minute of your workout count. Research shows that people who spend a long time in the gym

often clock up 'dead miles'. Thirty minutes of exercise working at 80% of capacity is as good as an hour at 60%. A study published in *The Journal of Applied Physiology* found people who reduced workout length by 25% could still improve their fitness, provided they boosted the intensity.

5. Keep your body guessing

You won't get fitter or stronger by doing the same thing day in, day out. Aside from being dull, your body adapts and stops developing new muscle. To make progress, change your workout every few weeks. Increase the weight of dumbbells, perform more reps, or make subtle changes to your exercises.



48 EXCELLENT ABS EXERCISES

If you want a strong core and solid set of abs, combine a healthy diet and consistent fitness routine with these must-do moves

► Ask most men what body part they most want to improve, and abs will feature high on the list. A rock-hard six-pack not only looks good, it also proves you know what you're doing when it comes to burning excess body fat and building hard, lean muscle mass.

Your abdominals are a collection of important postural muscles responsible for flexing your spine forwards, as when doing a crunch. The group also assists with breathing, stabilising the torso during exercise and protecting your internal organs from impact.

When people talk about the abs, they're often referring to the rectus abdominis, a paired muscle that runs vertically on either side of the front of the abdomen, separated down the middle by a band of connective tissue

called the linea alba, or 'white line'. It's this line, along with those that run horizontally across this muscle group, that creates the six distinct parts of a six-pack. (There are actually four vertical sections, but the bottom pair are just above the pubic bone and not typically visible.)

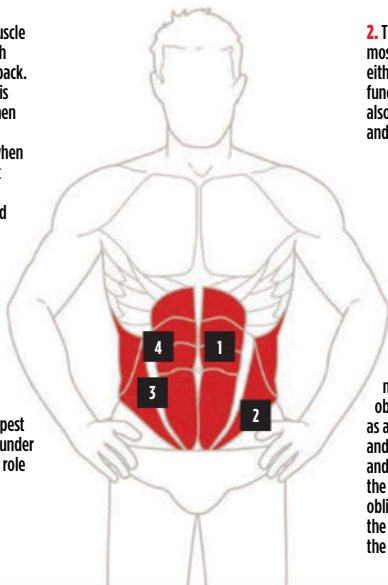
Heavy compound lifts, such as squats, deadlifts and overhead presses, are among the best moves for building your abs, because they require your core to work hard to stabilise your upper body and to transfer power between your legs and your torso. However, the abs are like every other muscle group in that they need to be targeted directly, from a variety of angles, to effectively elicit maximum muscle growth.

Which is where the following exercises come in...

ABS ANATOMY

The major muscles of your midsection and what they do

1. The rectus abdominis is a long, flat muscle that runs down the front of your stomach and is better known as your abs, or six-pack. It's an important stabilising muscle and is responsible for flexing your spine, as when performing a crunch. It also assists with breathing and plays an important role when forcefully expelling air from the lungs. It creates intra-abdominal pressure that protects your internal organs. It's divided down the middle by the linea alba.



2. The external obliques are the largest and most superficial of the obliques, which run either side of the rectus abdominis. Their function is to pull the chest downwards. They also have limited actions in both the flexion and rotation of the spine.

3. The internal obliques are deep-lying muscles that lie under the external obliques. They have two major functions: as antagonists to the diaphragm, to inhale and expel air from the lungs; and to rotate and bend the torso. This is achieved when the right internal oblique and left external oblique contract together, to flex and rotate the torso, bringing the left shoulder towards the right hip.

4. The transverse abdominis are the deepest muscles of the abdominals group, lying under the external and internal obliques. Their role is to stabilise your torso.



PLANK

WHY: Maintaining your body in a straight line works your core and lower back to build better posture, increase muscle mass and improve power transfer between your upper and lower body



- Hold your body in a straight line from head to heels, with your elbows beneath your shoulders and your head looking down.
- Hold the position for as long as you can without letting your hips sag.

VARIATIONS



DECLINE PLANK

Elevating your feet increases the amount of bodyweight your abs must manage throughout the move, making this a more advanced version for building core strength.



DECLINE PLANK WITH ALTERNATING FOOT TOUCH

Starting with your feet in a raised position, then lifting one leg at a time and slowly lowering it to the floor, works the entire core region.

INCLINE PLANK

Resting your elbows above your feet reduces the amount of bodyweight your abs have to manage, making this a great foundation move for improving core strength.



SIDE PLANK

WHY: Build a strong link between your upper and lower body, while working your obliques, with this stability hold

- Hold your body in a straight line from head to heels, with one elbow directly beneath your shoulder and your legs together.
- Hold the position for as long as you can, without letting your hips sag.



VARIATIONS

☑ SIDE PLANK STAR

Lifting up one leg and arm at the same time increases the tension placed on your core to maintain balance.



☑ GYM BALL SIDE PLANK

The instability of the gym ball makes every muscle of your core work together, to keep your body balanced and stable.



☑ SIDE PLANK WITH LATERAL RAISE

Raising one arm forces your core to work harder to keep your body stable.



BENCH LEG RAISE

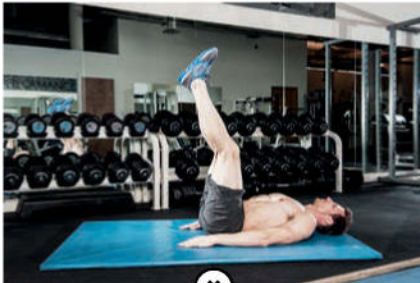
WHY: This move targets your abs and your hip flexors – the small but important stabilising muscles of your hips – as they work together to raise your legs

- Lie with your back and thighs on a bench, so your lower legs and feet are suspended off the floor.
- Raise your legs until they are almost vertical.
- Contract your abs to raise your hips off the bench, then return slowly to the start position.

VARIATIONS

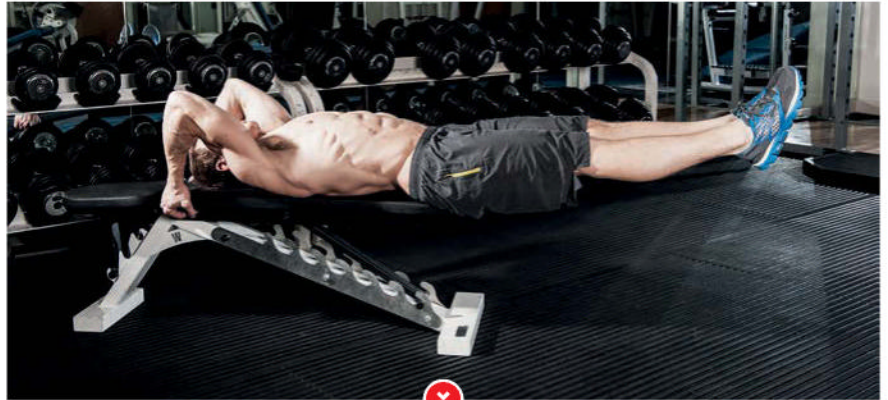
☑ HIP RAISE

Performing this leg raise on a mat makes it slightly easier, but you should still lift your hips off the floor to work the target muscles.



☑ MEDICINE BALL HOLD

Holding your legs off the floor with a medicine ball between your feet places major tension on your abs.



☑ MEDICINE BALL LEG RAISE

Holding the additional weight of a medicine ball between your feet works your muscles on the way up *and* the way down.



JACKKNIFE

WHY: Test your abs with this advanced move that requires flexibility as well as a strong, tight core

- Lie flat on your back with your arms fully extended and off the floor behind you, and your legs straight and raised off the ground.
- Contract your abs to raise your arms and legs simultaneously, so they meet above your stomach.
- Squeeze your abs in this top position, then slowly lower your arms and legs back down, but don't let them touch the ground.



VARIATIONS

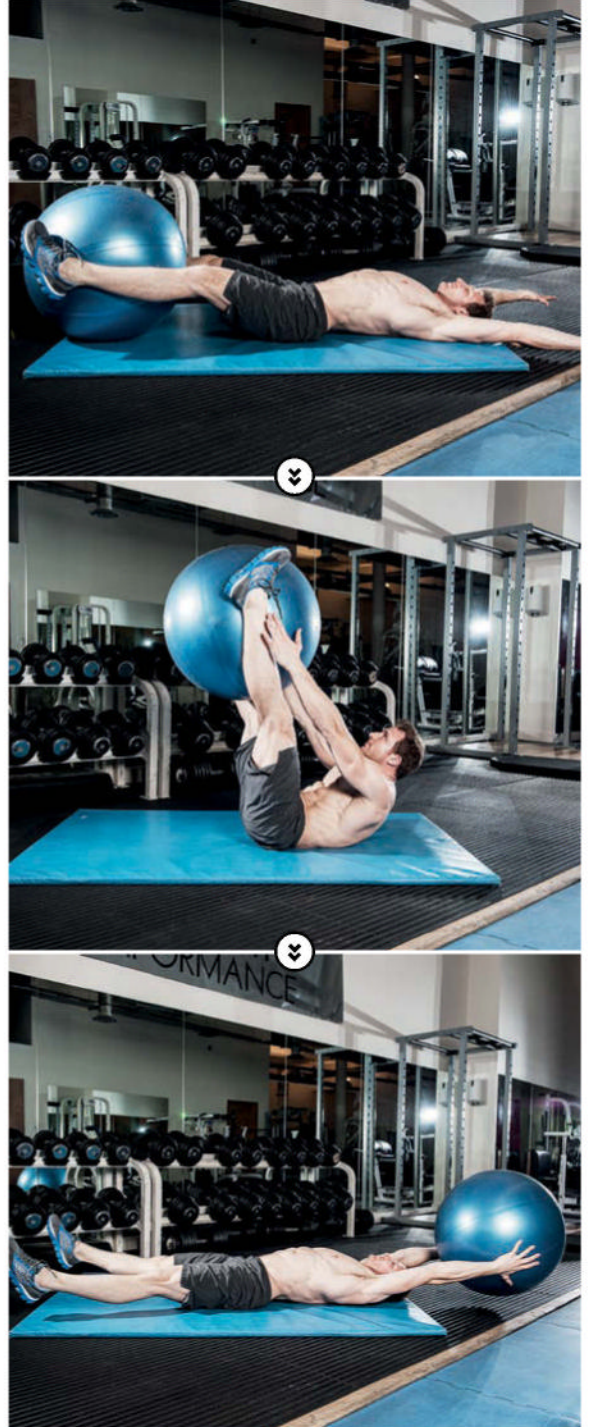
GYM BALL JACKKNIFE

Starting with your feet on a gym ball, then using your abs to draw your knees towards your chest, forces your core to work hard to maintain balance and stability.



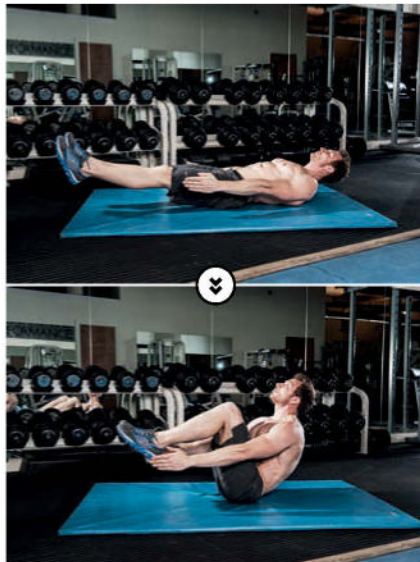
GYM BALL PASSING JACKKNIFE

Passing a gym ball from your hands to your feet then back again requires core strength, balance and flexibility.



MODIFIED V-SIT

Crunching up while drawing your knees towards your chest is an easier variation of the jackknife, but still an effective core-builder.



CRUNCH

WHY: The classic move for working your upper abdominals

- Lie on a mat with your arms crossed and hands on the top of your chest, with your feet on the floor and knees bent at 90°.
- Contract your abs to lift your upper back off the ground and curl your chest towards your knees.
- Pause at the top of the move, squeeze your abs, then slowly lower your torso back towards the floor.



VARIATIONS

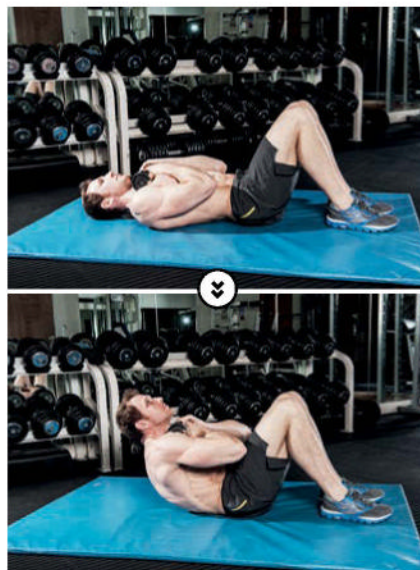
GYM BALL CRUNCH

Lying over a gym ball works your core muscles, because they must stabilise your body throughout the move. It also works your abs harder through a greater range of motion.



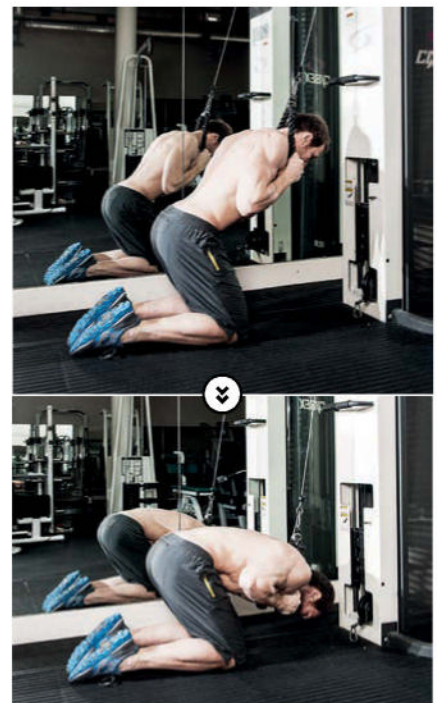
DUMBBELL CRUNCH

Holding a dumbbell with both hands over your chest increases the amount of weight your muscles must move and therefore works your abs even harder.



CABLE CRUNCH

Using a cable as resistance forces your muscles to manage the weight throughout the entire rep and allows you to add more load, to work your abs harder.



REVERSE CRUNCH

WHY: One of the best moves to work the lower abdominals

- Lie flat on a mat with your hands on the floor by your thighs, your knees bent at 90° and your feet on the floor.
- Contract your abs to raise your knees towards your chest.
- Pause at the top of the move, squeeze your abs, then slowly lower your feet back towards the floor.



VARIATIONS

SEATED REVERSE CRUNCH

Sitting on the edge of a bench increases the workload on your lower abs and forces your deep-lying core muscles to stabilise your torso.



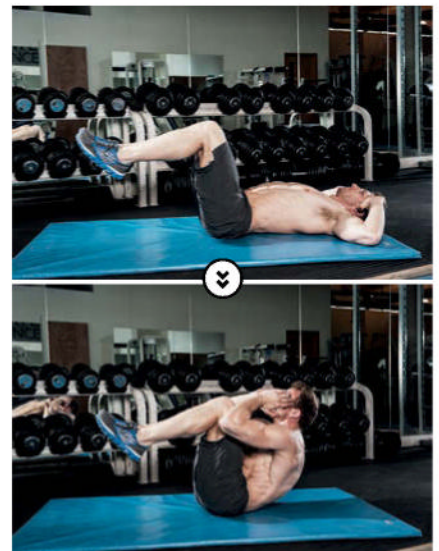
MEDICINE BALL REVERSE CRUNCH

The additional weight of a medicine ball between your feet will stimulate greater muscle growth.



TUCK AND CRUNCH

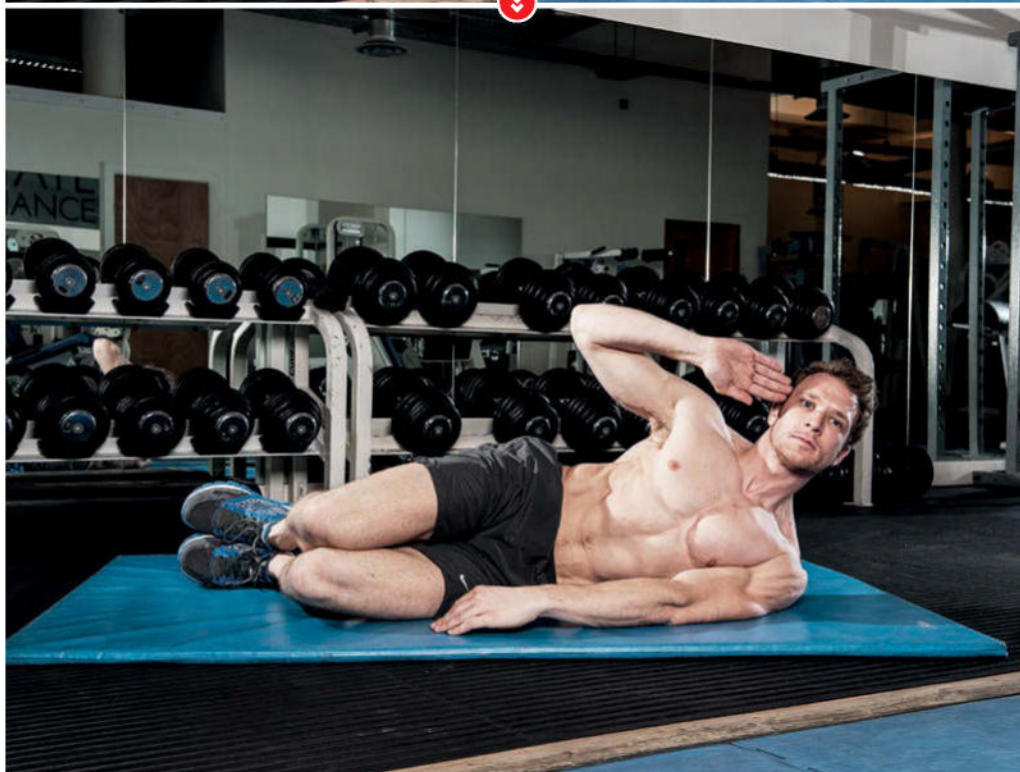
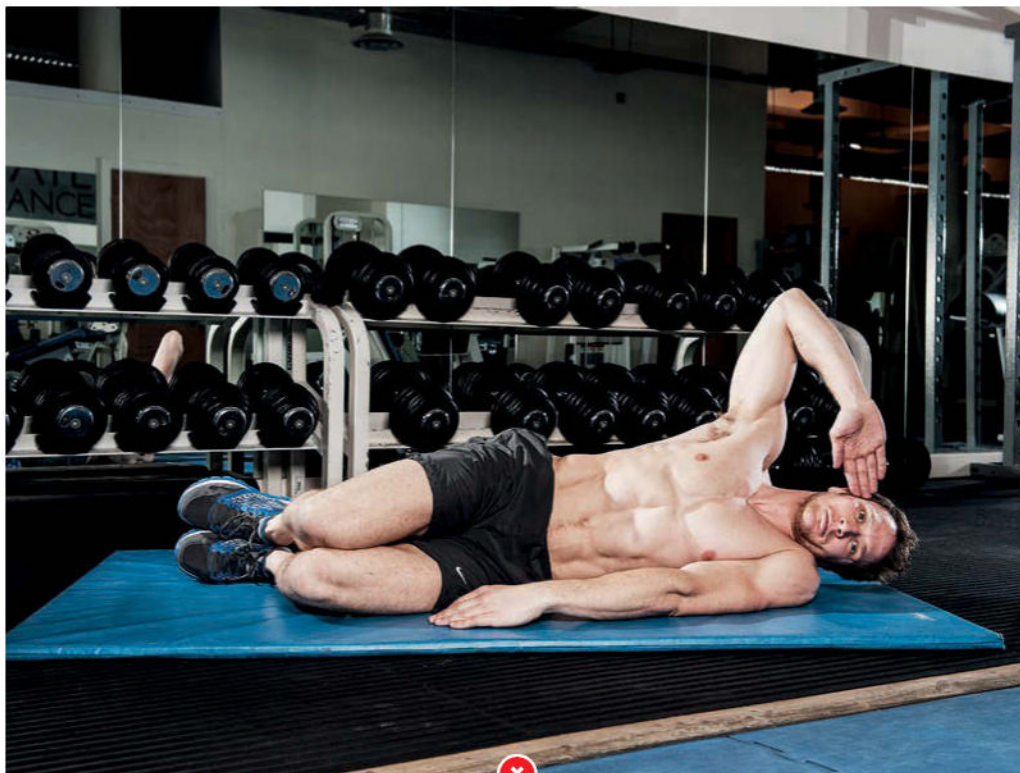
Raising your chest to meet your knees will target your entire abs in just one move.



OBLIQUE CRUNCH

WHY: Hit your side abs to round out that six-pack

- Lie on your side with your knees bent.
- Crunch your torso up off the floor by squeezing your obliques.
- Pause at the top of the move, squeeze your abs, then slowly lower your torso back to the floor.



VARIATIONS

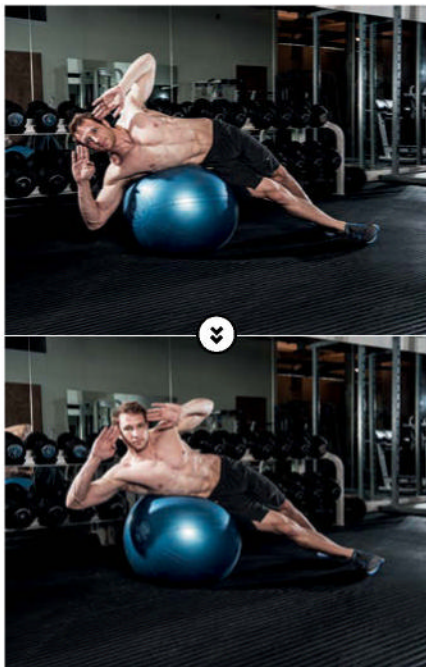
DUMBBELL SIDE BEND

Increase the resistance you place on your obliques by holding a dumbbell in one hand and leaning towards the floor on the same side.



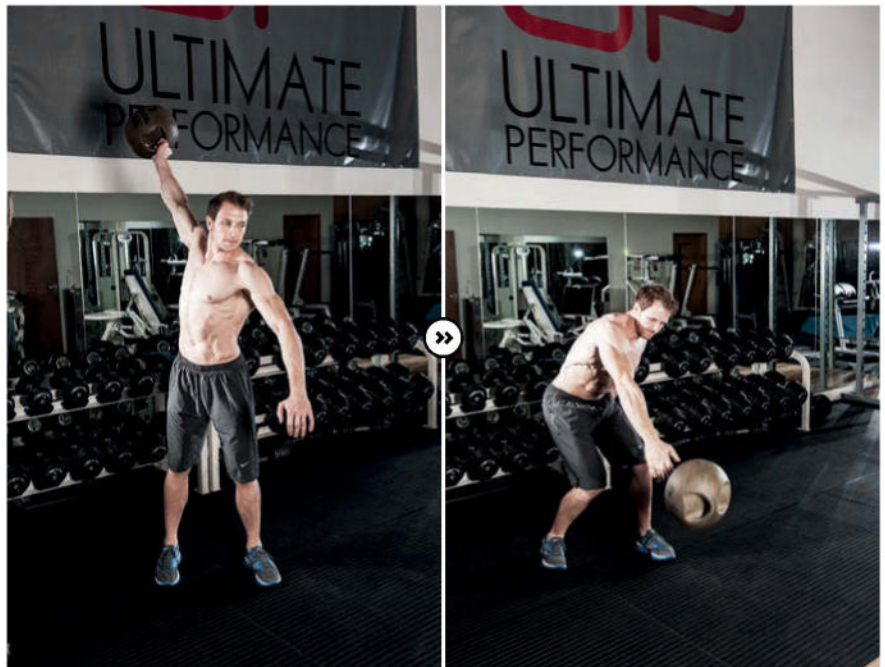
GYM BALL OBLIQUE CRUNCH

Using a gym ball allows for a greater range of motion to work your muscles, as well as activating your deep-lying core muscles to stabilise your body.



SINGLE-ARM MEDICINE BALL SLAM

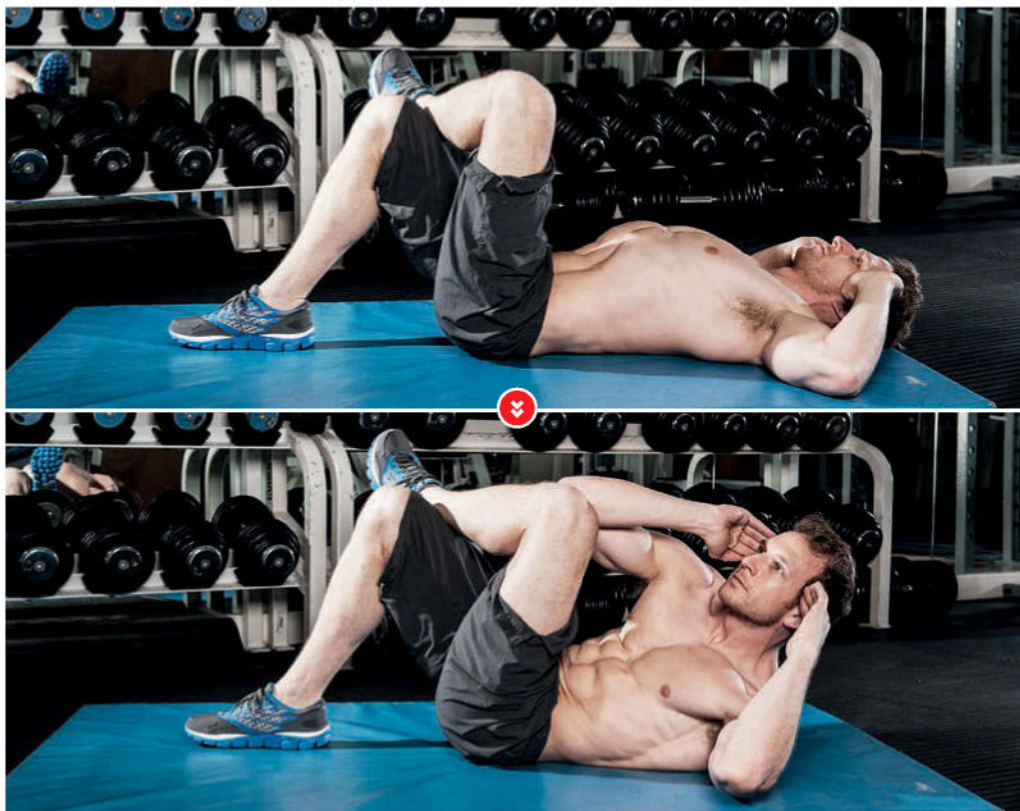
Holding a medicine ball in one hand above your head and then explosively throwing it across your body and to the floor fires up the fast-twitch muscle fibres of your obliques.



CROSS-OVER CRUNCH

WHY: Adding a twist to the crunch works your abs and obliques in one simple move

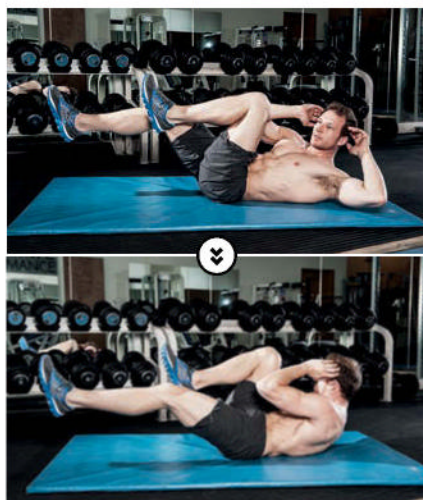
- Lie flat on a mat with your hands by your temples. Bend one leg and place that foot flat on the floor, then bend your other leg and rest that foot on the opposite knee.
- Contract your abs, to lift your upper back off the ground.
- As you crunch up, twist your torso, so your elbow meets your knee.
- Pause at the top of the move, squeeze your abs, then slowly lower your torso back towards the floor.



VARIATIONS

BICYCLE

Crunching up to make opposite knees and elbows meet works your abs and obliques. Do them quickly and keep tension in your abs throughout.



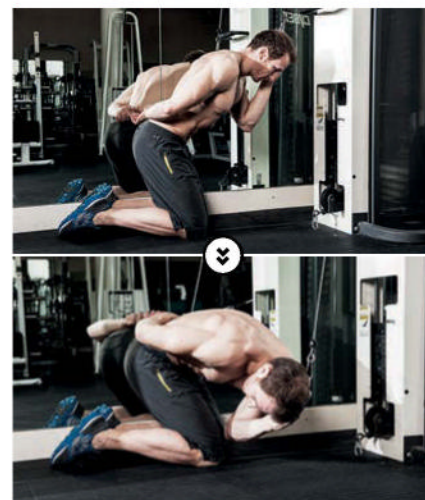
GYM BALL TWISTING CRUNCH

The instability of the gym ball recruits the entire core while also allowing for a greater range of motion.



SINGLE-ARM CABLE CROSS CRUNCH

Crunch and twist against the constant resistance of a cable, to work your entire midsection hard.



HANGING KNEE RAISE

WHY: A tough exercise that mainly works your lower abs, but also activates the rest of your core as it battles to prevent your body from swinging

- Hang from a bar with your body straight.
- Bend your knees and draw them up by contracting your abs, until your knees are almost touching your chest.
- Hold briefly, then slowly lower back to the start.



VARIATIONS

TWISTING KNEE RAISE

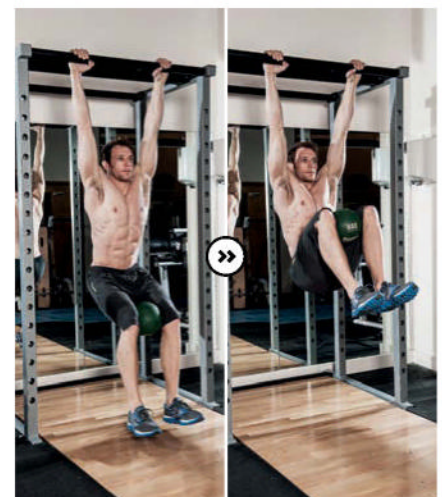
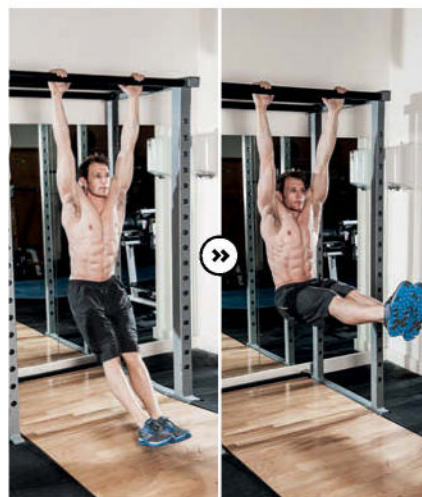
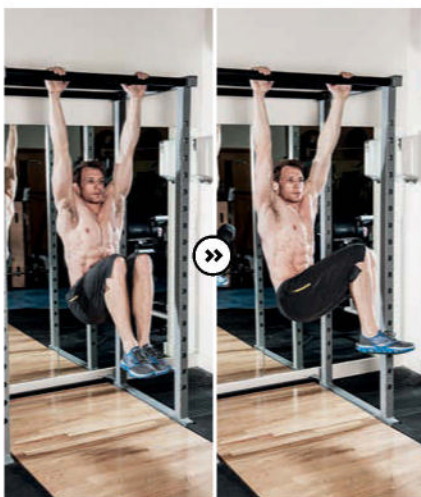
Bringing your knees up then twisting them to the sides brings your obliques into play.

HANGING LEG RAISE

Keeping your legs straight throughout the move makes your lower abs and core work harder.

MEDICINE BALL KNEE RAISE

The additional weight of the medicine ball between your knees increases the workload your abs must manage.



TOES TO BAR

WHY: Raising your feet to meet your hands then lowering them slowly recruits all the major muscles of the abs, making this a tough but rewarding move

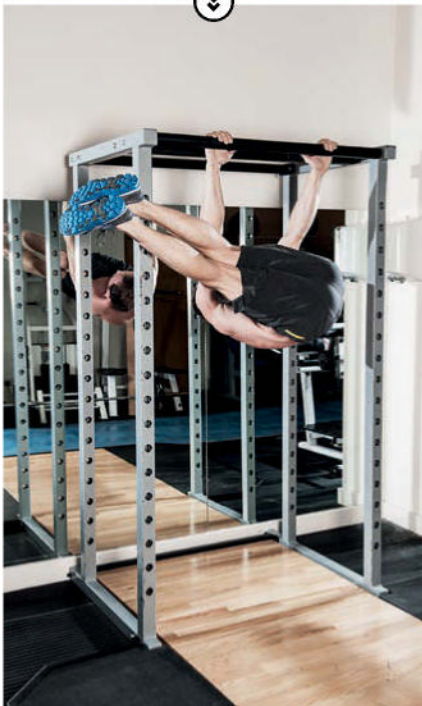
- Hang from a bar with your body straight.
- Keeping your legs straight, contract your abs to raise your feet above the bar.
- Hold briefly, then slowly lower back to the start.



VARIATIONS

❑ HANGING WINDSCREEN WIPER

Raising your legs and rotating them left then right is tough, but hugely effective at targeting your abs, obliques and other core muscles.



❑ ISOMETRIC LEG RAISE

Holding your legs straight at a 90° angle to your body places your abs under a great deal of tension, forcing them to grow stronger.



❑ GARHAMMER RAISE

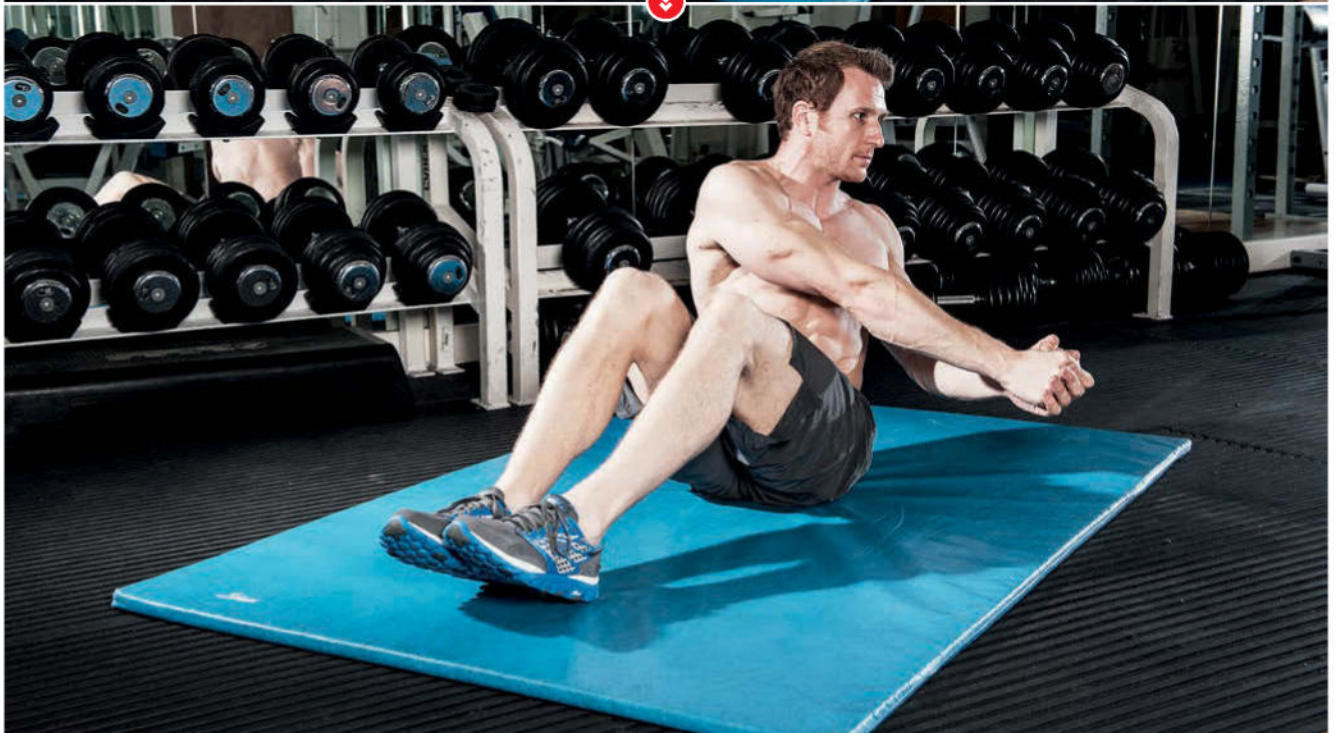
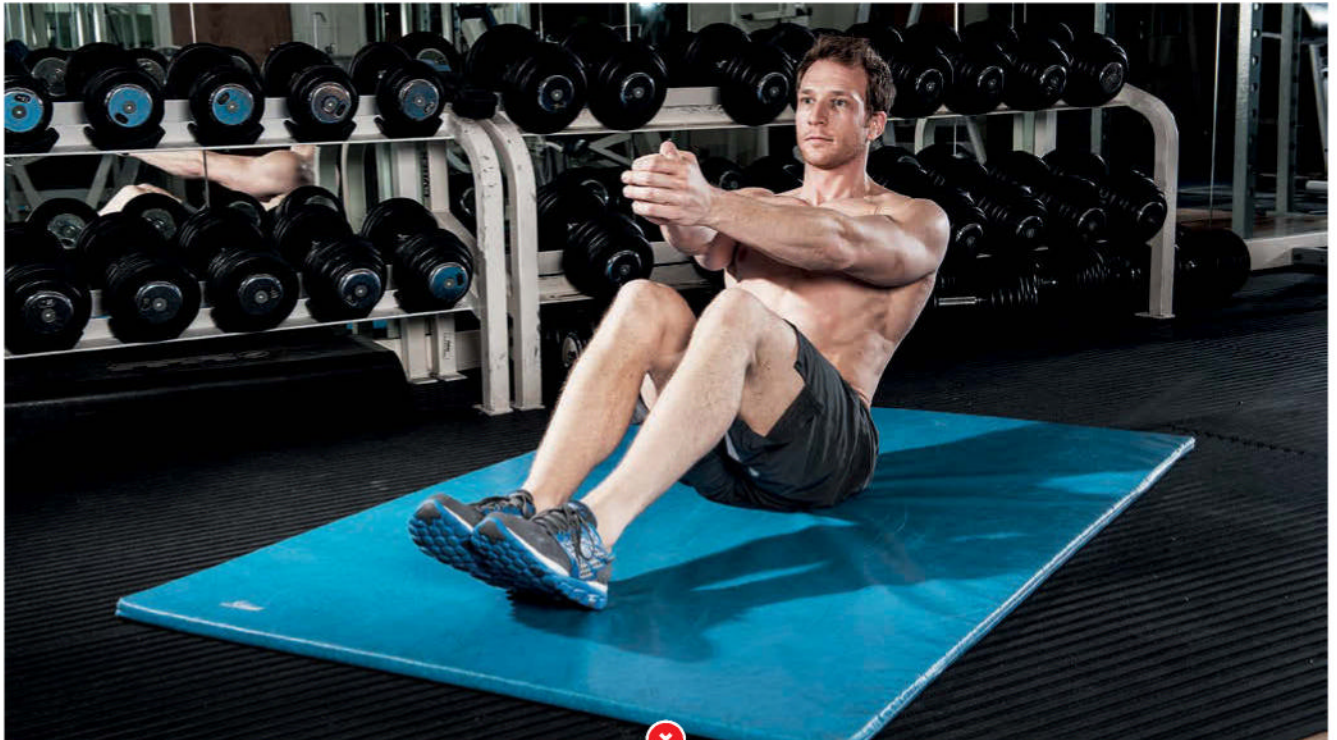
Quickly raising your bent legs towards your chest then back down again makes this a high-rep move that rapidly fatigues your abs.



SEATED RUSSIAN TWIST

WHY: This rotational move works your entire core, with specific emphasis on your obliques as you twist side to side

- Sit up with your knees bent, clasp your hands together in front of you at arm's length.
- Twist fully to one side then twist back to the other side, while keeping your torso upright.



VARIATIONS

☑ CABLE WOODCHOP

Using a cable places tension on your muscles throughout the move and allows you to increase the weight your muscles must manage.



☑ GYM BALL RUSSIAN TWIST

A gym ball makes the move easier on your lower back, while allowing for a greater range of motion and the need for your core to work hard to stabilise your body.



☑ LOWER-BODY WINDSCREEN WIPER

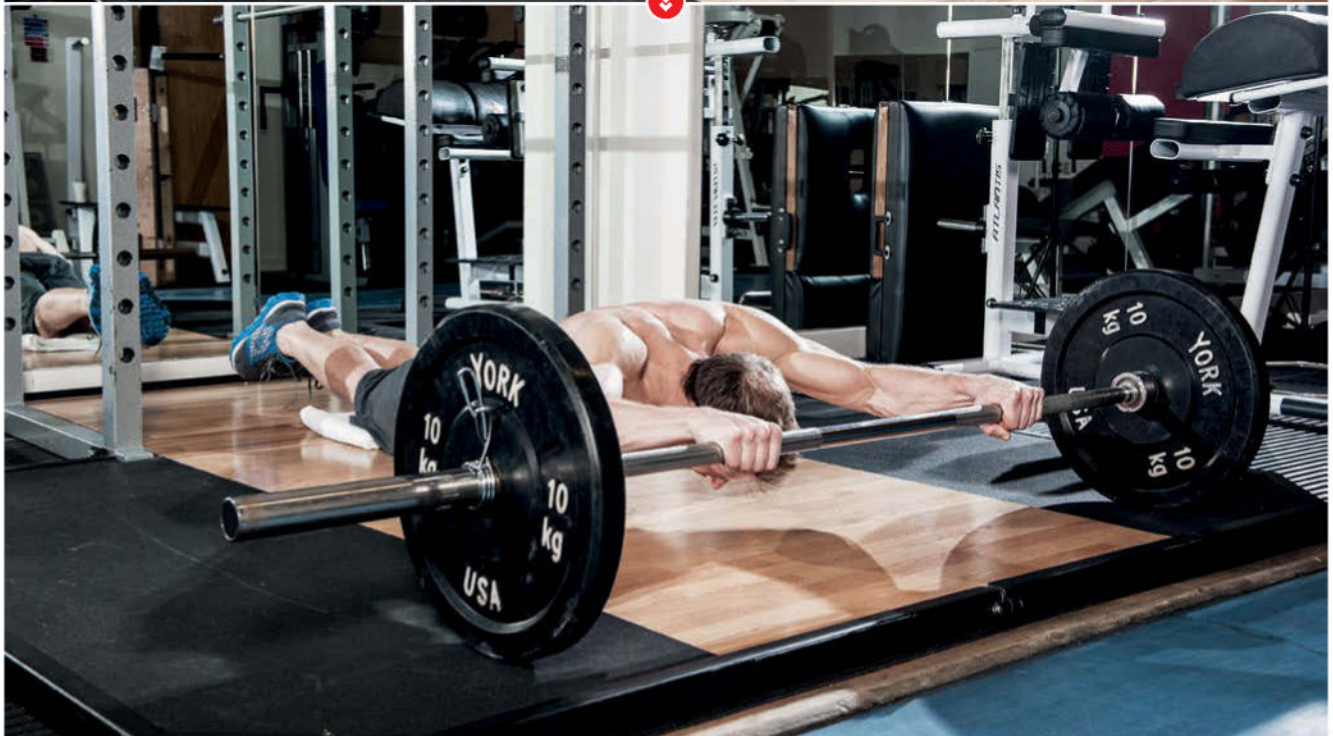
Keeping your back flat on the floor and twisting your straight legs to one side and then the other shifts the emphasis towards your lower abs.



BARBELL ROLLOUT

WHY: This tough move works your entire core region, especially those vital deep-lying muscles and your lower back

- Get on your knees with your arms extended and your hands holding a barbell with a shoulder-width grip.
- Slowly roll the barbell away from your body, keeping your core braced throughout.
- Slowly roll the barbell back to the start position.



VARIATIONS

STANDING BARBELL ROLLOUT

Starting in a standing position, then rolling out and back again, is one of the hardest – and consequently most effective – moves to work the entire core.



GYM BALL ROLLOUT

Resting your forearms on a gym ball reduces the strain on your lower back, while testing your core to keep your torso stable.



MOUNTAIN CLIMBER

Jumping your feet back and forth is a low-difficulty way to build core strength and muscular endurance while raising the heart rate.



SHOOT FROM THE HIPS

Improve lower-body mobility with this five-move stretching routine

➤ Mobility and recovery app pliability has a number of smart mobility flows – utilising a combination of yin yoga, specific movement flows and stretching – to reduce the risk of injury, tightness and optimise your body for performance.

One of pliability's flows is tailored towards improving hip mobility: The Hip Flexor Fix. This flow consists of five poses designed to improve not only your overall

functioning, but also performance and lower-body strength.

"I find that hips are one of the toughest areas on the body to loosen," says Mooney, "as they are often incredibly tense from everyday life activities, such as working at your desk, or relaxing on the sofa in the evening. Incorporating mobility flows within your routine will stretch out any tightness you have in the hip area."



MEET THE EXPERT

Cody Mooney is a two-time CrossFit Games athlete and director of performance for pliability.



STANDING FIGURE 4 SQUAT DOWN POSE ◀

Time: 1 min each side

- Stand straight with your feet hip-width apart.
- Tighten your abs.
- Lifting one leg, place your ankle across the opposite thigh, keeping your shin parallel to the ground, and gently start to lower your body down at a slow pace into a squat, then hold.
- Gently lift your body back up, pressing off the floor, so you stand up with an erect spine and both feet firmly planted back on the ground.
- Repeat this on the other side.

KEY BENEFITS: This pose improves balance, while opening up the hips.



SEATED WIDE-LEG HALF MOON ❏

Reps: 1 min each side

- Start in a seated position, with your legs straight and as far out to the sides as possible.
- With your right arm, reach overhead as far as you can towards your left foot.
- Slowly return to the middle, now reaching your left arm overhead towards your right foot.

KEY BENEFITS: Stretches the inside of your legs, releasing back and hip tension. Incorporating arm movements will stretch your shoulders, lats and abs. It's essential while performing this movement to use breathing to help you increase the stretch gradually, so you don't hurt or push to an end range that isn't safe.

SAMSON TO CROSS-ARMED HAMSTRING ❏

Reps: 5-10 each side

- Reach one leg behind you, keeping the heel on the ground to stretch the back of the calf in a runner's pose.
- Now, slowly bend that back knee down to the ground.
- Feel a deep stretch in the front of the hip as you push forward, lifting your arms up to feel a deeper hip stretch.
- Bring your arms back down, then sink back into a hamstring stretch, leaning your body forward.

KEY BENEFITS: This pose works numerous muscle areas at the same time: most importantly the hip flexors, but also your core, glutes, hamstrings and quads.



LIZARD AND ROTATION

Reps: 5-10 each side

- Start on your hands and knees.
- Step your left foot forward and lengthen your right leg back behind you.
- Bring your hands or forearms (depending on your mobility) to the inside of your left foot.
- Lift your left arm up and twist to a rotation, feeling the stretch for a few seconds, then switch legs to repeat on the other side.

KEY BENEFITS: The lizard pose allows your hips to open, increasing your flexibility and mobility over time. Tension in your back and spine will gradually decrease, and your hamstrings and glutes will stretch and strengthen.



The pliability app is available to download on iOS, Android and any web browser. All users get a 7-day free trial before a flat rate of £16.95 per month or £169.95 annually. Visit [pliability.com](https://www.pliability.com)

PIGEON STRETCH

Time: 1 min each side

- Start on your hands and knees, then bring your left knee forward and down to the left side, so your shin is facing forward.
- Slide your right leg back, keeping it in line with your body.
- Rest your forearms on the floor and elongate your spine.

KEY BENEFITS: The average adult sits for 6.5 hours per day. Pigeon is one of the best stretches to counterbalance the negative side effects of sitting. It will also help release the hips and lower back muscles, to bring better flexibility and decrease tension.



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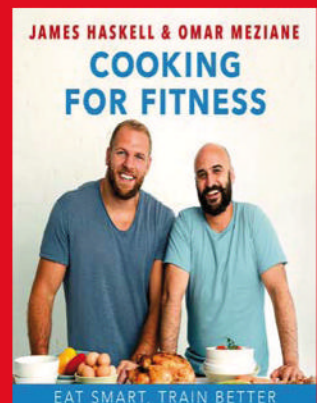
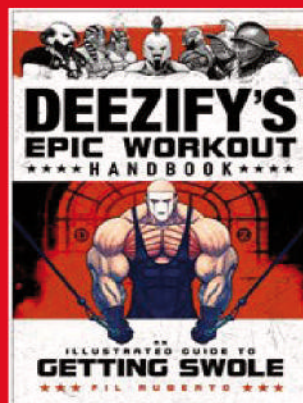
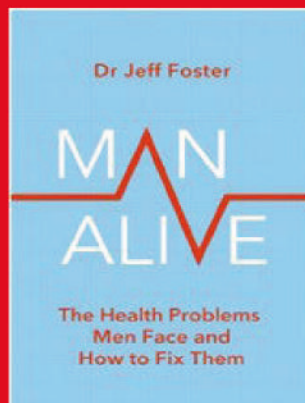
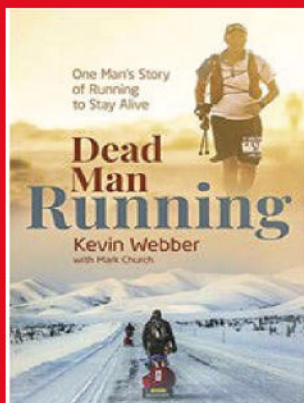
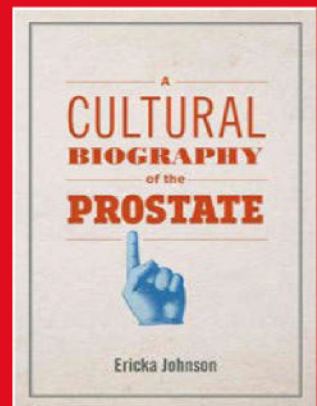
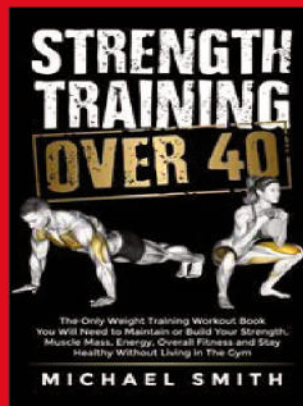
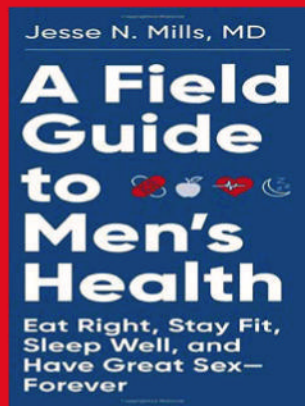
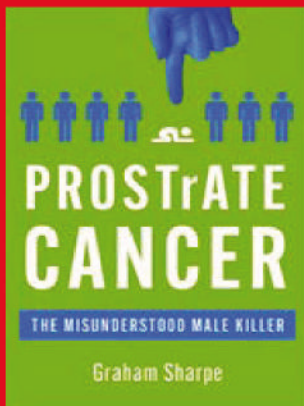
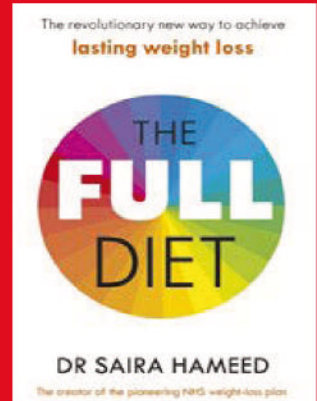
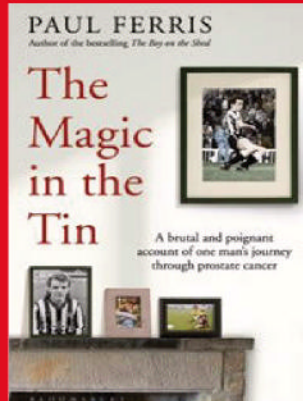
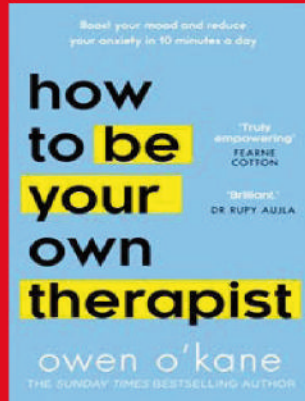
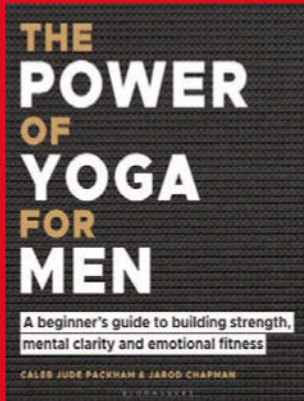


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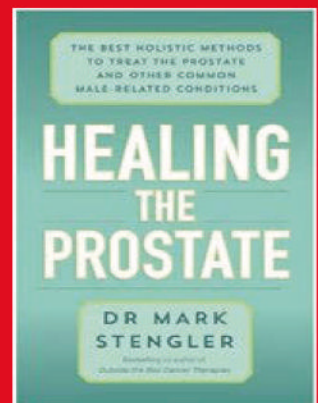
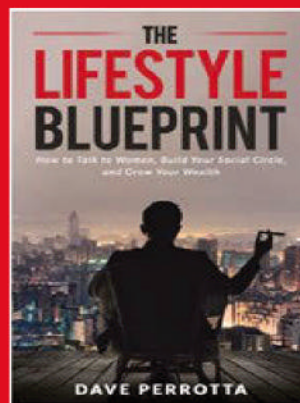
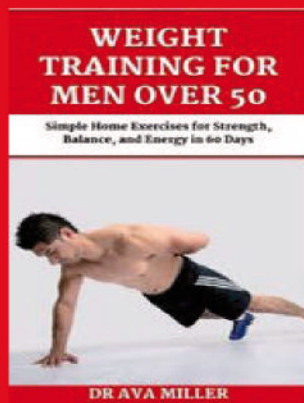
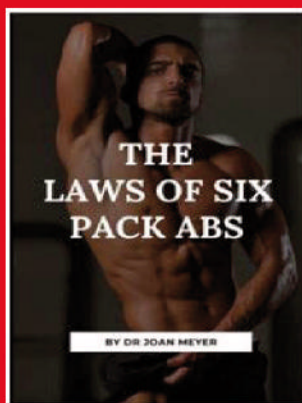
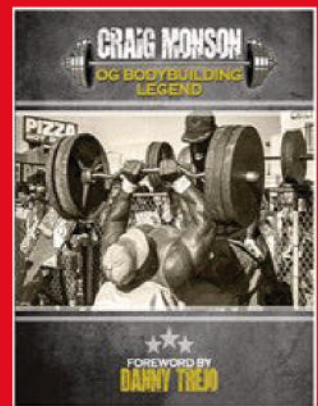
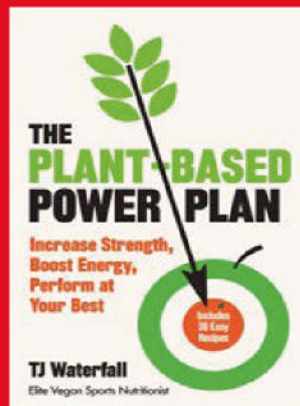
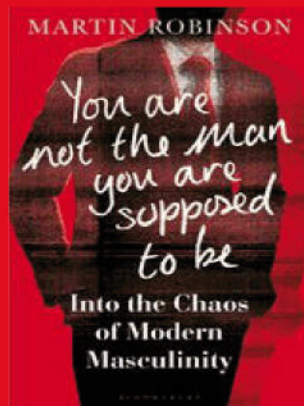
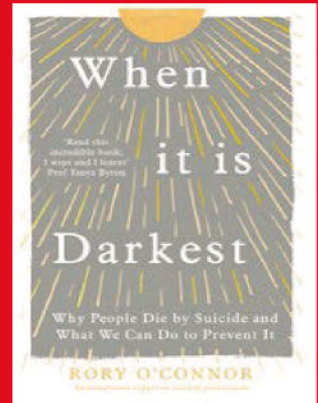
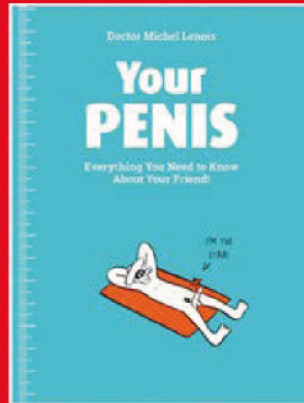
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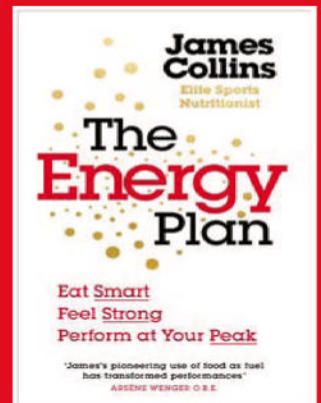
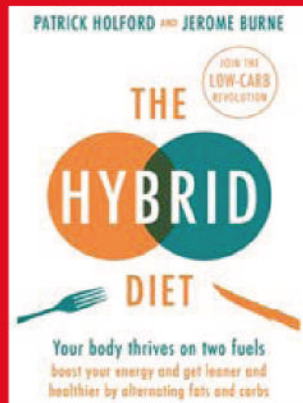
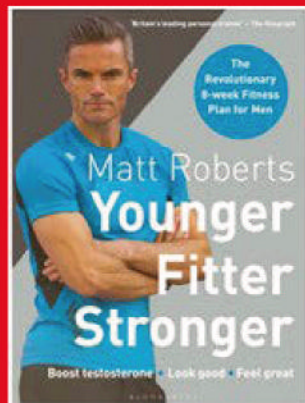
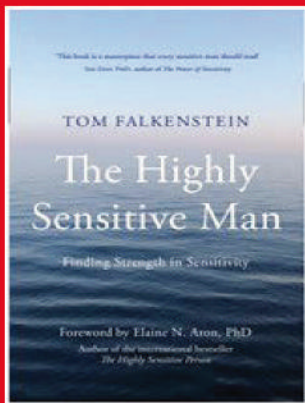
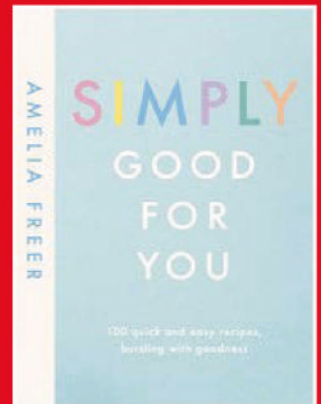
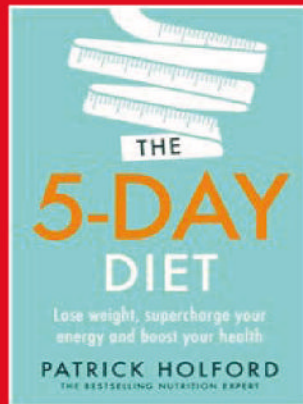
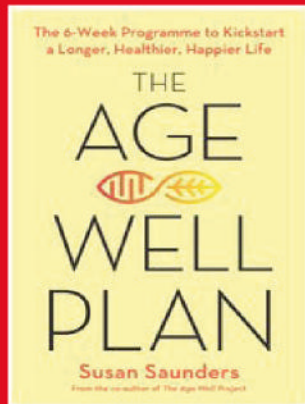
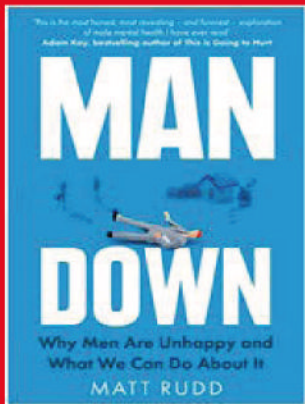
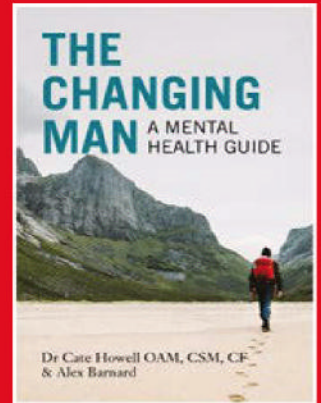
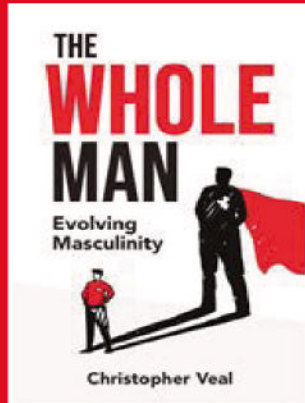
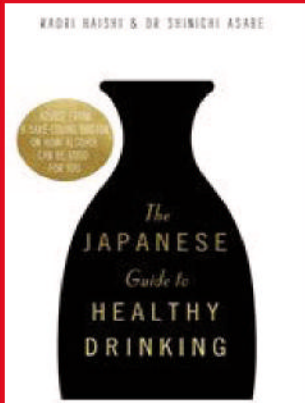
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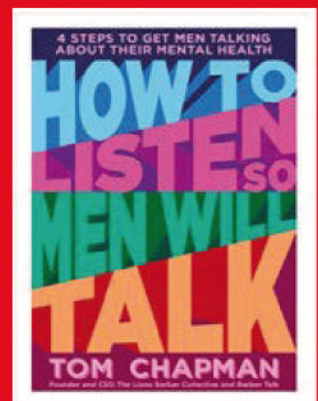
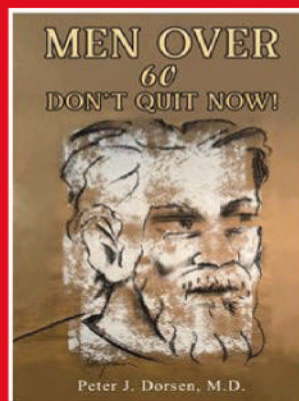
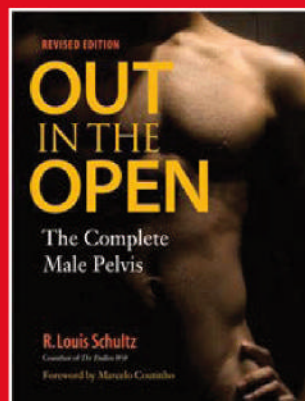
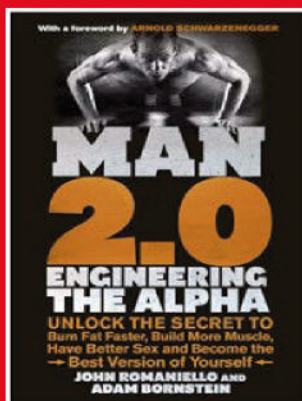
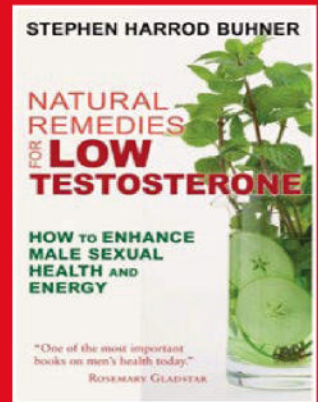
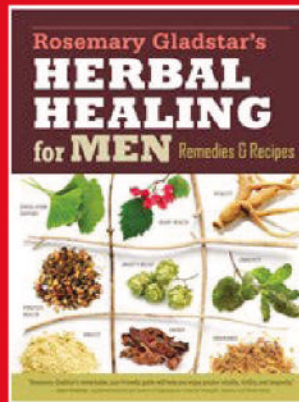
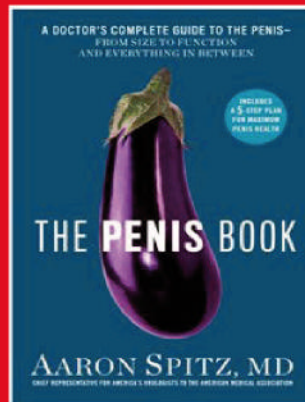
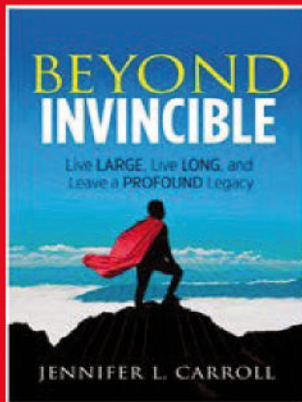
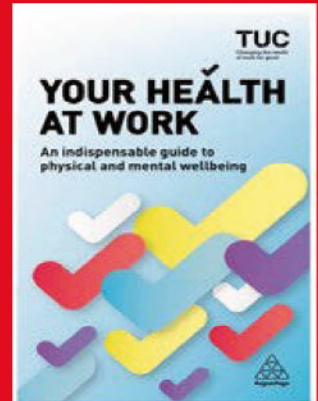
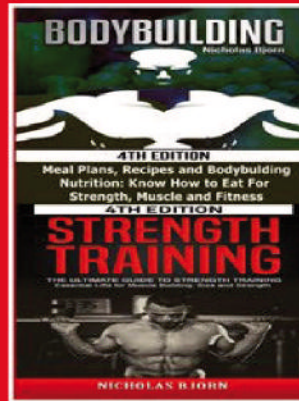
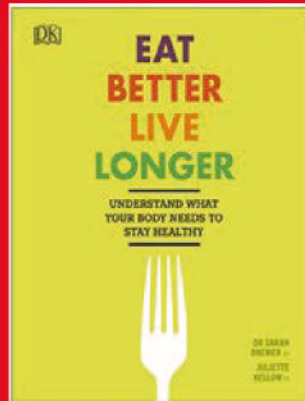
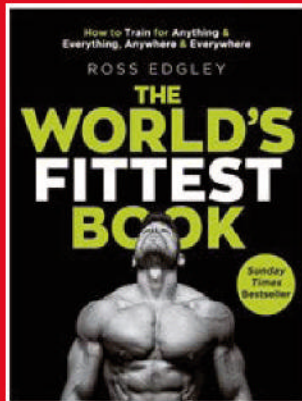
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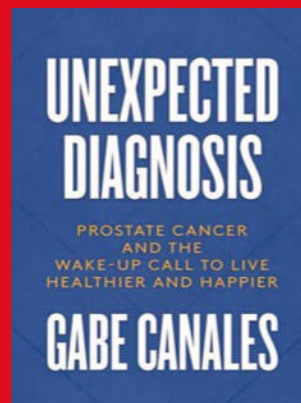
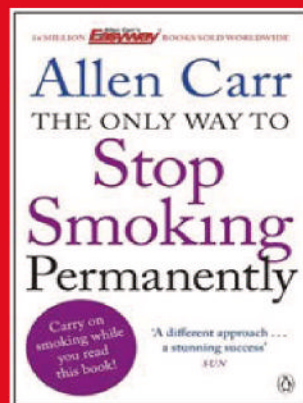
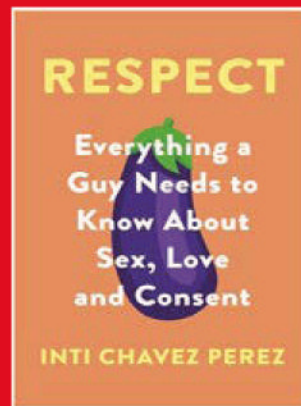
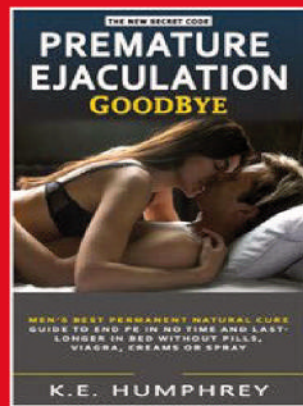
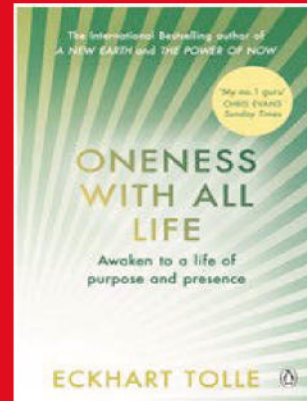
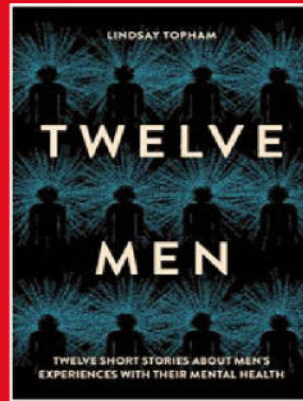
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