

Cardio–Strength Combo: Maximizing the Benefits

With today's fast-paced lifestyle and time being a prized commodity, when it comes to fitness, people want it all—cardiovascular, strength, and flexibility training—in just 50 minutes.

It's easy to design individual or small-group programs that combine several exercise modes so that you can meet multiple goals in a single session. But there is one challenge to keep in mind: Doing cardio, strength, and flexibility training during the same session seems to confuse muscles at the molecular level, in effect interfering with their ability to respond properly (Doma & Deakin 2013).

That interference can degrade strength and power gains (Doma & Deakin 2013; Jones et al. 2017), making combination training a poor fit for people whose primary goal is to build muscle mass. However, research shows that combined training is one of the best options for those seeking general fitness and weight loss (Wilson et al. 2012), so we'll focus on that in this article.

Before we get to the specifics of combination programming, let's look at the sample 50-minute session breakdown we'll use throughout:

- warmup/cardiovascular training: 5–20 minutes
- strength training: 15–35 minutes
- flexibility training: 5–10 minutes

This framework lets you customize programming to your precise fitness levels, goals, and needs.

Cardiovascular Programming

Cardio can be a brief warmup or a longer conditioning session, depending on your time frame. Traditional gym machines like treadmills, elliptical trainers, steppers, lateral trainers, and bikes get your clients moving and ready to transition to the resistance and flexibility segments of the session.

Cardio Model Suggestion

Follow these steps to craft a cardio session:

- **Choose mode(s).** A popular best practice is to use 5-minute micro sessions on two or more modes to vary mechanics and loading forces.
- **Set the duration goal.** Duration involves both intensity and frequency. We suggest you get at least 20 minutes of moderate-intensity exercise 5 days per week or 20 minutes of vigorous-intensity exercise 3 days per week.
- **Set the intensity goal.** Intensity should be 60%–80% of maximum heart rate for healthy adults, 50%–60% of HRmax for new exercisers and 40% of HRmax for

deconditioned clients. After 3–4 weeks of progress, new and deconditioned clients can go up to 80% of HRmax (interval training is a good option here).

Strength Programming

For combined training, we'll use a total-body conditioning model and foundation lifts because they work best for general fitness and weight loss goals.

Suggested Strength Exercises

Your main goal for each session is to choose a range of exercises that target all major muscle groups, with explosive lifts for intermediate to advanced exercisers:

- 2 exercises for bilateral and unilateral lower-body training
- 2 exercises for upper-body training
- 1–2 core exercises
- 1 explosive lift (if appropriate)
- 2–3 sets of each exercise

Advanced Training: Explosive Supersets

For intermediate to advanced exercisers, explosive superset training is a great way to combine cardiovascular and strength training. Pair a traditional foundation lift with an explosive lift. Set up two or more stations and have clients rotate through them. Please contact us with any questions.

Training Tips

- Because the intensity is higher during explosive lifts, they have fewer reps than foundation lifts. However, you can balance the sets.
- Rest periods should be longer after explosive sets than after nonexplosive sets.
- Where appropriate, you can add weight to explosive lifts, but first complete at least 1 set without resistance while you check your mechanics.

Cardio and Strength Supersets

Supersets also offer a fun, efficient way to combine cardiovascular and strength exercise. This is a great way for beginning to intermediate exercisers to train, especially if they are struggling to lose weight and/or develop a fitness habit. Using several stations, include cardiovascular and strength modes in supersets that keep you working while allowing them adequate rest.

Training Tips

- For cardio training, duration and intensity are inversely related. Choose based on fitness level. For beginners, start out with longer durations at a less intense pace.
- Any lower- or upper-body exercise can provide resistance, but it's best to select options that keep the client standing, to avoid rapid decreases in heart rate.
- Rest periods should be used when a client reports fatigue or when heart rate recovery is slow. For intermediate to advanced exercisers, continuous exercise is fine.

Circuit Sets

For small-group training with friends, there's nothing like an exercise circuit to keep you engaged and moving. The trick lies in designing a circuit that doesn't require your attention at all stations. It's best to choose several exercises on the easier end of the spectrum and position yourself at the most advanced station.

For example, a circuit might look like this:

- lunge
- bent-over row
- dips
- jump squat (trainer here)

Do 10-15 reps at each station and complete the circuit 2-3 times before moving on.

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