Pushup Power Plan

Transform a classic exercise into a total-body muscle sculptor with this complete guide to the most important move for men. By Ben Court

Physical fitness isn’t just about lifting. It’s about how strong you are relative to your body weight, according to Martin Rooney, P.T., C.S.C.S., author of Ultimate Warrior Workouts. That’s why he has his athletes in training perform body-weight tests. If they struggle, he knows that they need to either gain strength or lose weight.

A perfect body-weight test to help you determine your overall strength and fitness level? The classic pushup. Researchers at the University of Athens found that the standard pushup forces your upper body to lift 66 percent of your body weight.

Now if you’re like most people, you might think the pushup is just a chest exercise, but that’s only part of its benefit. Truth is, pushups are the most efficient exercise for time-strapped guys who want to shape up (that’s all of us!). This do-anywhere, no-equipment-required move works your arms and shoulders; strengthens your back, core, and chest; and also tones your butt and legs.

And there’s more: A recent Canadian study shows that adding pushups to your regular fitness regimen is a highly effective way to train your abs too. The reason: During a pushup, your core muscles have to work overtime to help you maintain proper posture.

Of course, you’ll only reap all of these great total-body benefits if you’re doing the exercise correctly. That’s why we enlisted the guidance of training experts to help you get the most out of this move. Use their cues to test your pushup potential, master perfect form, and grow your muscles.
IT'S THE ULTIMATE CLASSIC EXERCISE, AND IT STILL IS AN EFFECTIVE WAY TO CHANGE YOUR BODY.
SQUEEZE
Clenching your glutes locks your hips in place, keeping your body straight from head to heels. It also takes stress off your lower back.

PRESS
Holding your feet together adds muscle tension in your legs, enhancing energy transfer and power production throughout your body.

If your hips sag, consider that rep your last and end the set.

1 Use the Pushup to Test Your Strength and Power

Performing 50 pushups in a minute is a classic fitness benchmark. “But you rarely see guys do even one rep with perfect form,” says Rob Shaul, C.S.C.S., founder of the training facility Mountain Tactical Institute. “So whenever a guy tells me he can do 50 in a minute, I tell him to do it with the dead-stop pushup, where you lower yourself to the ground and lift your hands.” That pause eliminates the tendency of a muscle to spring back to a shortened state when stretched—and forces you to move through a full range of motion. The result? No cheating. “It’s a true test of strength,” says Shaul. Test yours and then follow Shaul’s plan to increase it.

Dead-Stop Pushup Test
Assume a pushup position with...
**BRACE**
Increasing core tension boosts stability all over. Imagine someone is about to punch you in the gut.

**STRAIGHTEN**
Keeping your arms straight so your hands align with your shoulders reduces stress on the critical joints.

**TWIST**
Driving your palms down and screwing them outward into the floor increases stability through your shoulders, neck, and upper back. Stability equals power.

Your feet together, your body straight, and your hands below but slightly wider than your shoulders, as shown above. Lower your body to the floor. Lift your hands off the floor, pause, and then place them back on the floor and push up explosively. Do as many as you can in 60 seconds: 20 is average; 30 is exceptional.

**Boost Your Strength**
To improve your fitness and carve muscle, add the dead-stop pushup to three of your weekly workouts. Aim to complete 5 sets, using the chart at right to guide your reps. Retest yourself after four weeks. Repeat the four-week cycle until you reach your goal: 30 perfect reps.

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**PYRAMID PUSHUPS**

1. **Single-Leg** Perform a pushup but elevate one leg instead of keeping both feet on the floor.

2. **Dive-Bomb** Start with your hips up; then pull your body forward, lower your hips, and straighten your arms.

3. **Knee-to-Chest** As you press up, bring a knee toward your chest. Alternate knees with each rep.

4. **Clapping** Do a pushup but press up with enough force to launch off the floor and clap.

5. **Knee-to-Elbow** Do a pushup but touch your knee to your elbow at the bottom. Alternate sides with each rep.

**2 Transform the Pushup into a Total-Body Workout**

If you look at the pushup as only an upper-body exercise, you’re not realizing its full potential. “By combining different variations, you create a workout you can do anywhere,” says Rooney. See for yourself with his pushup pyramid (above right).

**DIRECTIONS** Start at the base of the pyramid on the bottom left. As you work your way up one side and down the other, perform the number of reps indicated in the black circle for each exercise.

(See the descriptions on this page and opposite.) Rest as needed according to your own fitness level. Suggested rest periods are described in the chart below:

**BEGINNER**/Between each exercise. **INTERMEDIATE**/At the top (between sets of knee-to-elbow pushups). **ADVANCED**/At the end. Repeat.
You can blame Rocky Balboa for making the single-arm pushup the benchmark that separates chumps from champs in the gym. “It’s a high-skill, high-strength pinnacle exercise,” says Mike Fitch, c.s.c.s., creator of Animal Flow. “The move ensures that both of your arms are equally strong, and it activates your core more than a standard pushup does, forcing it to work harder to stabilize your body.”

**CONQUER IT**

Twice a week, do the exercises in the single-arm pushup progression, shown at left, as a circuit, moving from one to the next with 60 seconds of rest after each move. Do 3 circuits. Each week, do the elevated single-arm pushup slightly lower until you can do 5 reps on the floor with perfect form.

1. **Elevated Single-Arm** Spread your feet. Put one hand on a bar or tall box. Do 1 to 5 reps; switch arms and repeat.

2. **Skydive** Lift your left leg. Put your left palm, right fingers, and right knee on the floor. Do 5 reps; switch sides and repeat.

3. **Archer** Move one hand farther out to the side than the other. Do 10 reps, switch arms, repeat.