

Spice Up Your Fitness Routine With a Rowing Machine

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Rowing machines offer numerous benefits, including improved overall fitness, cardiovascular health and strength. They're user-friendly, time-efficient and can provide a meditative exercise experience
- › When purchasing a rowing machine, consider factors like handle design, durability, storage/portability, programming and additional features such as heart rate monitors and display screens
- › Proper rowing technique involves four steps: catch, drive, finish and recovery. Maintaining correct form is crucial for preventing injuries and maximizing workout effectiveness
- › Ideally, beginners start with 20- to 30-minute sessions at 16 to 20 strokes per minute. As fitness improves, intensity can be increased to 20 to 28 strokes per minute for two- to five-minute intervals
- › Various rowing machine exercises target different fitness goals, including AMRAP workouts, combination exercises with weights, timed challenges and pyramid-style routines that incorporate other bodyweight movements

If you frequently visit a gym, you've most likely seen people exercising on a rowing machine or have used it firsthand. As the name suggests, this machine mimics the movements performed by professional boat-rowers.

While rowing may not be the first exercise that comes to your mind when it comes to boosting your fitness, there are compelling reasons why I encourage you to try it. Who knows, maybe it'll become your favorite.

Five Benefits of Using a Rowing Machine

Getting regular exercise is one of the best things you can do to boost your overall health. But you can take it to the next level by adding rowing to your routine. In an article published in VeryWell Health,¹ occupational therapist Sarah Bence describes rowing as a "total-body workout:"

"Rowing is a complete workout that simultaneously exercises your upper and lower body. To put that in context, elite real-life rowers use about 70% of all the muscles in their bodies when they row.

As an amateur rower using an indoor rowing machine, you probably won't use as many muscles as the professionals, but it's still a great full-body workout option."

She further provides compelling reasons to try this equipment during your next workout session:

- **Improved fitness** — Using the rowing machine can help boost your overall fitness, as it targets both cardiovascular and strength components of your health. Moreover, rowing is an effective, low-impact exercise that targets major muscle groups. It may help also improve flexibility and muscle tone.²

Regarding the cardiovascular aspect, one study³ noted that participants had better cardiorespiratory levels and better resting brachial artery diameter after 12 weeks of consistent rowing machine usage. Another study,⁴ which involved postmenopausal women, showed similar results.

- **User-friendly** — Staying fit is important for overall health, and those who are apprehensive about it, such as people in their senior years, may benefit from using a

rowing machine.

In a study published in 2021,⁵ elderly participants demonstrated increased handgrip strength after using a rowing machine. In another study published in BMC Geriatrics,⁶ participants with mild knee osteoarthritis gained better strength and functional fitness after using a computer-assisted rowing machine.

- **Time-efficient** — If you're short on time, the rowing machine can get you more mileage out of your sessions. Even using it for less than 20 minutes can benefit your health.

That's because the rowing motion uses many muscle groups throughout your body, such as the hamstrings, glutes, forearms, biceps and latissimus dorsi.⁷ Bence notes,⁸ "Experts estimate that when you row, you use your legs for 65% to 75% of the work and your upper body for 25% to 35%."

- **Meditative** — While meditation is usually attributed to quiet, peaceful environments, that can also be achieved through exercise, as the repetitive, cycling motion of rowing can get you into a Zen-like state.

"As the movements become second nature, you may discover that you can let your mind empty and feel more at peace," Bence comments.

- **Alternative to other exercise machines** — The rowing machine can be a good alternative to other classic machines, such as the treadmill and elliptical trainer. Moreover, these machines use high-impact movements, while the rowing machine is a low-impact exercise. This makes it appealing for individuals who want to exercise but have joint issues.

Thinking About Purchasing a Rowing Machine?

If you have a home gym, adding a rowing machine to it can add variety to your workouts. But don't just go purchasing the first product you find. Here are five areas to consider:⁹

- **Handle design** – The grip's design and feel may be the most important factor, since your hands will be using them as you exercise. Look for grips with textured handles, especially if you have sweaty hands. Most people will be able to use any handle as long as it doesn't cause discomfort or pain.
- **Durability** – Rowing machines can be quite pricey, so you'll want something that will last a long time. Do extensive research on machines that you like, especially user reviews. Ideally, look for a machine that can support a minimum of 300 pounds.
- **Storage and portability** – Rowing machines can take up a lot of space, so be sure to measure it against the gym space in your home. If you have a small space, consider a foldable rowing machine, or one that has wheels so you can move it once you're done.
- **Programming** – Different manufacturers have various programming features to help users maximize their rowing machines. Common examples include automatic resistance or scenic rowing options. Decide which program features are worth it for you so that you can make the most out of your purchase. While these are nice to have, remember you can always get a great workout without them.
- **Additional features** – Modern rowing machines have features that can help you achieve your fitness goals, such as built-in heart rate monitors. While they may seem minor, they can make the overall experience better. Other examples include cup holders or an audio system that can play music. At the very least, your chosen machine must have a screen that displays the distance you've covered, and your split per 500 meters.

Beginners Guide to Rowing

While rowing may look simple, proper form is important. Not only will this help prevent injuries, but you'll also get more out of your workouts. In an interview for The New York Times, rowing coach Neil Bergenroth breaks down the rowing motion into four steps:¹⁰

- **Catch** — Place yourself onto the seat, sliding forward toward the front. Keep your knees above your ankles, with your arms outstretched and hands in front of your feet.
- **Drive** — This is where much of the power comes from while rowing. Engage your core and push away from the machine with your feet. Keeping your heels down is important as it activates the muscles on your backside, such as the calves, hamstrings and glutes.

After pushing your legs about halfway back (your knees roughly around 90 degrees), start leaning back, pivoting through your hips. Done correctly, you'll feel your latissimus dorsi muscles (the major muscle group in your back) engage while gripping the handle. Drive the elbows back and pull the handle into your chest.

- **Finish** — At the end of the rowing stroke, sit up tall with your core engaged and legs straight out in front. Lean your torso backwards at around 30 degrees. The handle is close to your stomach, slightly lower than chest height. In fact, trainers recommend beginners start with the Finish to ensure proper posture from the start.
- **Recovery** — The last part is where your body returns to the starting position. To do it properly, extend your arms again, then tilt your body forward. Pivot using your hips so that your torso leans forward. Don't hunch, as it may injure your lower back. Once your torso is angled forward, bend your legs to move the seat toward the front of the machine.

Eight Exercises to Try on the Rowing Machine

Once you've gotten the fundamentals of the rowing motion, it's time to incorporate it into an actual routine. Rowing can be done long and slow (for endurance purposes) or short and fast (for interval training). Again, beginners are advised to use proper form to avoid injuries and get the most out of your workout.¹¹

Rowing speed is measured by the stroke rate, which can be found on the machine's display. According to The New York Times, beginners are advised to do 20 to 30

minutes, at a pace of 16 to 20 strokes per minute.¹² If you exercise regularly, you can bump up the intensity by rowing for two to five minutes at 20 to 28 strokes per minute.

Afterward, you can move on to more challenging, fun exercises combined with rowing. Men's Health¹³ has several examples you can try:

Five-minute row and core workout – This AMRAP (as many rounds as possible) exercise will test your endurance for five minutes, as it combines sprints and core workouts:

1. Start rowing as hard as you can for 200 meters.
 2. Once you complete 200 meters, immediately turn around and initiate a high plank. To do this, place your feet on the machine's seat, with your palms flat on the floor.
 3. Squeeze your shoulder blades, abs and glutes to create tension.
 4. Drive your knees toward your chest while engaging your muscles.
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Renegade and row – A great exercise to cap off a workout session, the combination of the rowing machine and renegade will target your back and core muscles at the same time:

1. Grab two light or medium dumbbells.
2. Begin with a high plank position.
3. Perform renegade rows for three reps. To do this, row once on each arm, then do a pushup.
4. Hop on the rowing machine with your screen set to zero.
5. Row until you've burned 8 calories.
6. Rest until the next minute begins.
7. Do all the above, adding a calorie for each cycle. Complete five rounds of this exercise.

1,000-meter mixup – This workout encourages you to go fast because the sooner you finish, the fewer hollow rock ladders you have to do:

1. Set your rower for 1,000 meters and begin rowing.
2. Every minute, get off the rowing machine and do a hollow rock ladder.
3. The first time you get off the rower, do five hollow rock ladders. You can refer to this video¹⁴ so you can do hollow rock ladders properly.
4. The second time you get off, do six. Keep adding one hollow rock every minute. Aim to finish the exercise in five to seven minutes.

Row and burpee challenge – This exercise will push you to maintain a steady pace. If you don't, you'll have to do burpees as a penalty (If you're unfamiliar with burpees, you may refer to this video¹⁵):

1. Do five sets of 500-meter rows. Aim to finish each set within 1:40 minutes.

2. Rest for 5 minutes between each round.
3. If you finish within 1:40, you won't do any burpees. But if you finish over that time, count how many seconds you're over 1:40. That's how many burpees you'll have to do.

Bobby maximus' row to hell – Created by famed trainer Bobby Maximus, this rowing variation requires the participation of a gym buddy to help you complete it:

1. Row 500 meters, then get off the machine. Your partner will now row 500 meters.
2. Once your partner completes, get on the machine again and complete 400 meters. Your partner will also do the same.
3. Repeat the process until you row 300, 200 and 100 meters.

The calorie count-up – This exercise has a built-in warmup and ends with a flourish:

1. Set the machine to count one-minute intervals. The goal here is to burn the required number of calories before each minute is up.
2. For the first minute, row until you reach 5 calories, then rest for the remainder. Once the next minute starts, row for 6 calories.
3. Repeat the process, increasing the calories for each minute. Aim to complete as many rounds as you can. Stop when you can no longer reach the target calories in the minute.
4. Try to reach 15 minutes.

From the ground up workout – This exercise combines other movements, with the resulting routine targeting your entire body:

1. Row 100 meters.
2. Do bodyweight squats for 10 repetitions.
3. Row 200 meters.

4. Do another set of bodyweight squats, 10 repetitions.
 5. Next, do alternating reverse lunges for 20 repetitions.
 6. Do kneeling bicep curls to overhead press for 10 repetitions.
 7. Complete three rounds of steps 1 to 6. Rest as needed.
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Pump and row pyramid – Warm up for five minutes, then perform these exercises in order:

1. Row 100 meters as fast as you can.
 2. Do five repetitions of bodyweight squats.
 3. Do five pushups.
 4. Do five repetitions of feet-elevated mountain climber. That's one round.
 5. For the next round, row 200 meters and do 10 repetitions of steps 3 to 5.
 6. For the third round, row 300 meters and do 15 repetitions of steps 3 to 5.
 7. For the fourth round, repeat step 5.
 8. For the fifth round, go back to rowing 100 meters and 5 repetitions of steps 3 to 5.
 9. Finish off the exercise with a minute-long plank.
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Sources and References

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- ² [VeryWell Fit, April 23, 2024](#)
- ³ [Eur J Appl Physiol. 2023; 123\(6\): 1241–1255, Abstract](#)
- ⁴ [Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health 2023, 20\(4\), 3238, Abstract](#)
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- ⁶ [BMC Geriatrics, October 2022, volume 22, Article number: 809, Abstract](#)
- ⁷ [The Edge, May 17, 2024](#)
- ^{8, 9} [VeryWell Fit, July 10, 2024](#)
- ^{10, 11, 12} [The New York Times, November 2, 2022](#)

- ¹³ Men's Health, January 11, 2024
- ¹⁴ CrossFit, "The Hollow Rock"
- ¹⁵ CrossFit, "The Burpee"