

You've likely seen the videos on Tiktok where a strongly-physiqued fitness professional is defying gravity on the pull-up bar. The act is incredible to watch, but it leaves many on their fitness journey wondering if that type of strength and control is attainable. Interestingly enough, the type of training that leads to such seemingly inhuman feats is one of the most accessible, beginner-friendly training methods around. While this is an extreme example, it serves as an incredible segway into the world of calisthenics.

What is Calisthenics?

Calisthenics is a form of bodyweight training. Bodyweight exercises require little-to-no equipment, experience, or outside knowledge. They also often involve compound movements focused on multiple large muscle groups rather than individual muscles. In layman's terms, this means that these total-body exercises can be performed anywhere, by anyone, at any time. Whether you're wary of gym equipment, working out at home, or looking to incorporate something more dynamic into your routine, calisthenics can be a beneficial addition to your training.

Brief History

The word *calisthenic* came from the Greek *kallos*, meaning "beauty", and *sthenos*, meaning "strength". Calisthenics was the main form of athletic and military training across the ancient world - most notably applied by the Spartans. Today, calisthenics is practiced both recreationally and competitively.

Benefits of Calisthenics

Calisthenic exercises are designed to improve muscle coordination, dynamic flexibility, strength, stabilization, and range of motion. These foundational fitness concepts are necessary for a variety of health goals. For this reason, calisthenics training can be incorporated into nearly any routine.

Improved Muscle Coordination

Intermuscular coordination refers to the timing and motor recruitment of individual muscles within a muscle group to perform movements. Each movement requires different muscles within the group to take on a role as an agonist, antagonist, synergist, neutralizer, stabilizer, or fixator. The agonist is responsible for most of the work in a movement, the antagonist provides resistance to balance tension in the joints, and the other roles support and stabilize the muscles through different planes of motion. How the muscles working in these roles interact with one another determines the outcome of the movement.

Since calisthenic exercises require compound movement, they improve muscle coordination. The key to this improvement is repetition. The more a movement is practiced correctly, the more optimally timed your muscle responses will be.

Dynamic Flexibility

Dynamic flexibility is the range of motion that can be achieved by a joint or muscle during active movement. This type of stretch stimulates nervous response, increases muscle temperature, and reduces stiffness. Dynamic flexibility is important because it significantly reduces the risk of injury and improves muscle control.

Calisthenic encourages dynamic flexibility by requiring the joints and muscles to move through their full range of motion. For example, a squat demands full flexion and extension in the same movement.

Strength and Muscle Mass

Bodyweight athletes, such as gymnasts, have shown exceptional strength and muscle control due to calisthenic training. This display is due to the focus on the progressed repetition of movement. There are ways to prioritize strength over mass and vice versa, but these benefits are a byproduct of balanced calisthenic training.

Functional Fitness

Since calisthenic exercises involve basic movements like pushing, pulling, and squatting, they are also considered functional exercises. Functional exercise mimics the activities that occur in daily life such as opening a door or getting up from the ground. Repetitively executing these exercises improves the way your body performs these movements, thus reducing the risk of injury from everyday activities. This is specifically beneficial later in life when the body begins to lose mobility, flexibility, strength, and endurance.

Limitations of Calisthenics

There is no denying the benefits of calisthenic exercise in terms of physique. However, it's important to note that calisthenics can only take you so far in terms of building muscle mass since doing so requires progressive resistance. Eventually, your body will grow accustomed to its own weight and you will need to provide additional external resistance such as bands or weights.

Applications of Calisthenics

Calisthenics for Endurance and Stability

The key to endurance training with calisthenics is the utilization of static holds alongside increasing repetition. A static hold is when the targeted muscles reach peak tension and the position is maintained for a short period. These contractions should be held between 10-30 seconds. Holding increases muscular endurance, promotes neuromuscular engagement, and enhances stability.

Calisthenics for Strength and Muscle Mass

The key to strength training with calisthenics is low-repetition, high-intensity work. Strength is built most effectively when completing 3-5 sets of 1-6 repetitions. When establishing how many repetitions to do in each set, settle on a number 1-2 repetitions away from your point of failure. According to a [meta-analysis](#) on weekly set volume in relation to strength gains, you should aim to complete 5-12 sets of your targeted movement per week.

Tips and Considerations

Before you dive into creating a calisthenics routine, it's vital to understand where you're at on your fitness journey and where you're heading. The following tips and considerations will guide you through the process.

Know Your Skill Level

Calisthenic exercises offer a variety of progressions, to increase difficulty, and regressions, to make them easier. In order to determine where you should start, you need to understand your current skill level. Start by assessing timing and repetitions until failure for the following calisthenic exercises: plank, wall-sit, sit-up, push-up, squat, and pull-up. As you perform the exercises, note which ones you found the most difficult, the least challenging, and any areas of pain or discomfort. This should give you a basis of what exercises require modifications.

Have Postural Awareness

Calisthenic training often requires compound movements through the full range of motion across multiple planes. Because of this, having postural awareness is vital to preventing injury and improving dynamic flexibility. Postural assessments can be conducted by medical and fitness professionals alike. However, diagnosis of underlying conditions related to posture can only be done by a medical provider.

Set Goals for Calisthenic Training

Determine what you are trying to achieve through calisthenics and formulate your routine around that goal. Make sure to account for rest between sets and recovery between days.

- Endurance and Stability: High-repetition movements with integrated static holds.
- Muscle Mass: Medium-repetition with medium-intensity work.
- Strength: Low repetition with high-intensity work.
- Functional Fitness: A combination of the above-mentioned techniques throughout the week.

Calisthenics For Beginners

We've outlined a calisthenic exercise routine for those just getting started. This routine includes upper-body push, upper-body pull, core stabilization, knee flexion, and hip extension exercises. Perform these exercises 3 times a week with a rest day in between. Aim for 3 sets of each movement. Most importantly, take this time to familiarize yourself with the movements and work through them with control and precision.

Note: If you're injured or have underlying medical conditions that affect your ability to safely perform these exercises, please consult your healthcare team before attempting.

- 8 Push-ups
 - **Regression:** If you're struggling to get through a floor push-up, try doing one from a stable surface that allows your body to incline. At home, this could be a table, chair, or wall. In the gym, try utilizing a bench, box, or wall.
- 8 Pull-ups
 - **Regression:** Pull-ups can be difficult for those just starting out. We encourage you to give it a shot, but if you find yourself struggling, assist the pull-up using a resistance band or opt for an inclined pull-up using a bar or the wall.
- 10 Flat Straight Leg Raises
 - **Regression:** If your core can't yet support this exercise, modify it by bending your knees during individual leg lifts.
- 8 Hanging Dips
 - **Regression:** Struggling to complete hanging dips is common for beginners. Adjust this exercise to your level by allowing your feet to touch the floor thereby assisting the movement. Another alternative regression is the box or bench dip.
- 10 Squats
 - **Regression:** Full depth squats are not for the faint of heart. This exercise can be modified with the addition of a chair or box. Squatting to this point helps you control depth.
- 30 Second Plank
 - **Regression:** Planks focus heavily on the core. If you're having issues completing the full 30 second plank, then modify by allowing your knees to touch the floor.