

# PRIMAL ESSENTIAL MOVEMENTS

Strength training can be simple, convenient, and safe for everyone with the Primal Essential Movements (PEM). Pushups, pull-ups, squats, and planks collectively work all the major muscle groups of the body in a functional manner, providing benefits that are directly applicable to all types of everyday fitness, work, and play activities. You don't have to feel intimidated venturing into a gym, nor assume the inherent risks of loading your body with external sources (meaning gym equipment) for resistance exercises. The PEMs are a great choice for novices and old hands alike because they use *bodyweight* for resistance, comprise simple movements that are easy to learn (and very difficult to screw up and get injured from), and have a series of easier progression exercises that approximate the familiar baseline movement. Even hard-core strength athletes can make the PEMs challenging enough to stimulate fitness breakthroughs.

Begin your strength-training sessions with a two- to five-minute warmup of low-intensity cardiovascular exercise (walking, jogging, stationary cycling, or other cardio machine at a heart rate of "180 minus age" or below). You should break a light sweat, indicating elevated body temperature, and be breathing at a comfortable rate. Conclude each workout with a two- to five-minute cooldown to allow sufficient time to return your breathing rate to normal. Be certain that you have medical clearance before attempting any strenuous workout, including those described here.

Next to each exercise listed are levels of "mastery" for males and females. The mastery levels represent your target performance in one set of maximum effort. Your first PEM workout should

be an assessment session to determine, by trial and error, your maximum effort level for each essential movement. If you can't complete the mastery number of reps for a particular Essential Movement, drop down to the appropriate progression exercise to enable you to complete a sufficient number of repetitions in your workout. As you improve your performance with your progression exercise, bump up to the next progression exercise or the baseline movement. Advanced strength trainers can integrate numerous adaptations to increase the degree of difficulty beyond the baseline Essential Movements, including donning a weighted vest for the entire PEM session.

## Males – Primal Essential Movement mastery

- 50 pushups
- 12 pull-ups (overhand grip)
- 50 squats (thighs, just below parallel to ground)
- Plank: 2 minutes holding the Forearm/Feet Plank position

## Females – Primal Essential Movement mastery

- 20 pushups
- 5 pull-ups (overhand grip)
- 50 squats (thighs, just below parallel to ground)
- Plank: 2 minutes holding forearm/feet plank position



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**PUSHUPS** (lats, pecs, triceps). **Mastery = Male 50, Female 20.** Assume pushup plank position (arms extended below you, hands forward, body straight). Lower to ground—chest touching first! Keep body dead straight, core and glutes tight, head and neck neutral to torso. Elbows bend backward at 45-degree angle as you lower.

**Easiest Progression:** Wall Pushups (M50, F30). Do standing pushups with your arms extended and hands resting against a wall. Maintain plank position as you lower to the wall and re-extend your arms to starting position.

**Next Progression:** Bench Pushups (M50, F25). Do pushups with hands resting on a bench or other object elevated from ground. Maintain plank position as you raise and lower.



**PULL-UPS** (back, lats, pecs, biceps). **Mastery = Male 12, Female 5.** Grasp bar at shoulder width with overhanded grip. Elbows tight, chin tucked, shoulder blades retracted to protect spine. Lead with chest up, keeping lower body quiet. Raise your chin over the bar and gradually lower all the way until your arms are straight (or just before straight if you have joint issues).



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**Easiest Progression:** Chair-Assisted Pull-Up (M20, F15). Start with your leg loosely positioned on a support chair underneath the bar. Engage your upper body muscles and raise yourself up to the bar. Use just enough leg force to assist getting your chin over the bar. You probably only need to use one leg, but can use two if necessary. Yes, *everyone* can do pull-ups!



**Next Progression:** Chin-Up (M7, F4). Many find the chin-up to be slightly easier than a pull-up, particularly if you have wrist, elbow, or shoulder issues. Simply invert your grip on the bar so your palms face you, and raise yourself until your chin is over the bar.



**SQUATS** (lower body). **Mastery = Male 50, Female 50.** Feet shoulder-width or slightly wider apart. Feet face directly forward, or if you must, point them slightly outward. Lower yourself by extending your butt out and bringing thighs to just below parallel to the ground. Envision screwing your feet outward into the ground—left foot counterclockwise, right foot clockwise—tracking your knees over your midfoot as you lower down. Strictly refrain from allowing the knees to cave inward. Maintain a straight spine (it will travel from a 90-degree to a 45-degree angle), but resist the urge to lean forward—chest up! Use your quads and buttocks to absorb the load both sitting and standing. Go down in a smooth and steady movement until your thighs are a bit past parallel to the floor. If you are flexible enough to lower all the way down (“ass to grass”) go for it (and work toward it!). Return...Return to a standing position without locking your knees, again making sure your knees track in line with your feet.



**Easiest Progression:** Assisted Squat (M50, F50). Hold pole or other support object while lowering into and raising up from squat position. Use support object as little as possible.



**PLANKS** (core and lower back, as well as shoulders, triceps, hip flexors). Mastery = **Male 2 minutes, Female 2 minutes.** Hold pushup plank position while resting your elbows on the ground. Maintain position until you can no longer maintain straight body position or your arms/shoulders fatigue. An optional movement to stimulate the oblique abs is to lean on one extended arm and rotate body into sideways plank position, preserving a straight line from your head to toe. Hold until failure, and then repeat on other side.



**Easiest Progression:** Forearm/Knee Plank (M 2 minutes, F 2 minutes). Assume plank position with forearms and knees resting on ground. Engage core muscles and glutes during exercise.



**Next Progression:** Hand/Feet Plank (M 2 minutes, F 2 minutes). Assume plank position a la pushup starting point, with arms extended and hands and feet on ground.



**PEM ISOLATION:** For a unique challenge, set an ambitious numerical goal for a single PEM and make that your entire workout one day. Perform reps until failure, then rest as needed and tackle additional reps, counting your accumulated total to reach your goal. For example, some mornings I'll aspire to do 200 decline pushups. These might accumulate in sets as follows: 60, 50, 30, 25, 25, and 15. I might do half the sets in 10 minutes, then get sidetracked for 20 minutes before I finish off the last several sets.

**PEM SPRINT WORKOUT:** This is a fun session that's over with quickly and integrates strength training and sprinting. It's a great challenge to all of your muscle groups and your cardiovascular system.

- One set maximum effort pushups, then immediately sprint 80 meters. Rest 30-60 seconds until breathing returns to normal.
- One set maximum effort plank, then bunny hop 40 meters. Rest 30-60 seconds.
- One set maximum effort pull-ups, then sprint 80 meters. Rest 30-60 seconds.
- One set maximum effort squats, then bunny hop 40 meters. (Wow!)



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