

Weighted Calisthenics: The First 12 Weeks

Your first structured loading block.

Twelve weeks of loaded pull-ups and dips, built around the number almost nobody calculates correctly: what you are actually lifting.

READ THIS PAGE FIRST

Are you ready to add weight?

Adding load to a movement you can't yet do cleanly at bodyweight doesn't accelerate anything. It just moves the failure point earlier and puts it on your elbows.

Entry standards

MOVEMENT	MINIMUM	STANDARD
Pull-up	8 reps	Full hang, chin clearly over the bar, no kick, controlled descent.
Dip	10 reps	Shoulders to roughly elbow height, no bouncing out of the bottom.
Push-up	20 reps	Chest to fist height, body in one line.
Dead hang	45 sec	Straight arms, active shoulders, no strap.
Joints	Quiet	No elbow, shoulder or wrist pain in the last four weeks.

IF YOU MISS ANY OF THESE

Run *Calisthenics: The First 12 Weeks* instead. It is the same structure without external load, and it builds exactly the base this block assumes you already have. Coming back in three months with 10 clean pull-ups beats spending three months with a belt on and sore elbows.

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SECTION 01

Total System Weight

A barbell lifter knows exactly what a jump costs: 100 kg to 105 kg is five percent. A weighted-calisthenics lifter says "I added 5 kg", and has no idea whether that was a rounding error or the biggest jump of the block.

THE NUMBER THAT MATTERS

Total System Weight = bodyweight + external load. That's what your body moves, and it's the only figure that makes two sessions comparable. The plate on the belt is the small part.

How to read the last two columns. Take the jump as a share of what you are actually lifting, then apply that share to a 100 kg barbell lift. An 80 kg lifter who puts 5 kg on the belt goes from lifting 80 kg to 85 kg, a jump of 6.3%, and 6.3% on a 100 kg bench press is 106 kg. Same jump: one of them sounds reasonable and the other sounds reckless.

BODYWEIGHT	ADDED	TOTAL SYSTEM WEIGHT	REAL JUMP	SAME JUMP ON A 100 KG LIFT
80 kg	0 kg	80 kg	--	Your working set
80 kg	+5 kg	85 kg	+6.3%	100 -> 106 kg
80 kg	+10 kg	90 kg	+12.5%	100 -> 113 kg
80 kg	+20 kg	100 kg	+25%	100 -> 125 kg
60 kg	+10 kg	70 kg	+16.7%	100 -> 117 kg
95 kg	+10 kg	105 kg	+10.5%	100 -> 111 kg

WHY IT CHANGES YOUR TRAINING

Nobody adds 12 kg to their bench in one session. But "just add 10 kg to the belt" is standard advice, and on an 80 kg lifter it is the same jump. It is the biggest single reason people stall in month two.

WHY IT CHANGES YOUR NUMBERS

Two lifters both add 10 kg. At 60 kg bodyweight that's a 16.7% increase; at 95 kg it's 10.5%. The belt number says they did the same thing. Total System Weight says they didn't.

One convention, used consistently

Some methods subtract the mass of the limbs that stay on the bar, for a pull-up that is roughly five percent, so an 80 kg lifter counts 76 kg rather than 80. It is defensible, and if your logbook or app already does it, your numbers will sit a little below the table above. Either convention works. What does not work is switching between them halfway through a block, because then nothing compares to anything.

Pick one, write it down, and keep it for all twelve weeks. Weigh yourself at the same time of day once a week, and record that too.

SECTION 02

How to load

The loading tool decides how small a jump you can make. Since a small jump in kilos is a large jump in percentage, this matters more in weighted calisthenics than in almost any other training.

METHOD	VERDICT
Dip belt	The right tool. Loads pull-ups, dips and muscle-ups cleanly, hangs below the centre of mass, and takes small plates. Better long-term than improvised loading once the weight climbs.
Weighted vest	Fine, with two caveats: the load sits higher, which changes the feel, and most vests jump in fixed increments. Good for volume days, poor for precise progression.
Backpack	Acceptable for the first few weeks. Shifts around under fatigue and is hard to keep consistent between sessions, which makes your log unreliable.
Ankle weights	Skip for the big three. Useful for runners and specific accessory work, but not the loading tool for pull-ups, dips and muscle-ups.
Dumbbell between feet	Works, but it changes your body position and forces you to think about holding the weight instead of the pull.

BUY SMALL PLATES BEFORE YOU BUY BIG ONES

A pair of 1.25 kg plates and a pair of 2.5 kg plates will carry you through this entire block. On an 80 kg lifter, 1.25 kg is a 1.5% jump - which is roughly what a sensible progression looks like. If your smallest available increment is 5 kg, you will be forced into 6% jumps and you will stall.

Setting your starting load

In week 1 you find the load that lets you complete 5 clean reps with 3 in reserve. Rough starting points, then adjust from the first session:

BODYWEIGHT PULL-UP MAX	START AT ROUGHLY	NOTE
8–10 reps	5% of bodyweight	4 kg on an 80 kg lifter. Yes, that's small. Start there.
11–14 reps	8% of bodyweight	Expect to add load through the first two weeks.
15+ reps	12% of bodyweight	Your limiter may be strength, not endurance, see p.10.

Dips typically tolerate 25–50% more external load than pull-ups. Set them independently; never assume the belt weight transfers.

SECTION 03

The week

Three sessions with two distinct jobs. Heavy days build the strength; the volume day keeps your bodyweight reps, and your tendons, from being neglected while you chase load.

PATTERN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
Every week	Heavy	--	Volume	--	Mixed	--	--
DAY 1 • HEAVY					PRESCRIPTION		REST
Weighted pull-up					See block		3 min
Weighted dip					See block		3 min
Inverted row or ring row					3 × 10		90s
Hanging leg raise					3 × 8		90s
DAY 2 • VOLUME (BODYWEIGHT)					PRESCRIPTION		REST
Pull-up, bodyweight					4 sets • RIR 3		2 min
Dip, bodyweight					4 sets • RIR 3		2 min
Push-up variation					3 × 12		90s
Band pull-apart					3 × 15		60s
Grip work: dead hang or towel hang (p.9)					2–3 sets		60s
DAY 3 • MIXED					PRESCRIPTION		REST
Weighted pull-up, lighter					4 × 6–8		2 min
Weighted dip, lighter					4 × 6–8		2 min
Legs: reverse lunge or Bulgarian split squat					3 × 10/leg		90s
Dead hang, accumulate					90s total		--

BEFORE EACH SESSION • NOT LOGGED

Hangs, some shoulder work, then two bodyweight ramp sets of the day's first movement. That is preparation rather than training: it does not belong in your log and it does not count toward the week's volume.

Day 3 uses roughly 80% of your Day 1 load. It is not a second heavy day, and treating it as one is the most common way this program breaks.

SECTION 04 • BLOCK ONE

Weeks 1–4 • Base

Five sets of five, adding load slowly, staying well clear of failure. This block exists to teach your elbows and grip that loaded pulling is now a normal thing that happens three times a week.

WEEK	DAY 1 HEAVY	DAY 3 MIXED	RIR	FOCUS
1	5 × 5	4 × 8	3	Find the load. When you are unsure between two, take the lighter one.
2	5 × 5	4 × 8	3	Same load if week 1 felt right.
3	5 × 5	4 × 7	2–3	First load increase for most people.
4	5 × 5	4 × 7	2	Consolidate. Add nothing new.

THE LOAD PROGRESSION RULE

Complete all five sets of five, clean, with a rep still in reserve on the last set, then add 1.25 kg next session. Not 2.5. Not 5. If you miss a rep on any set, you repeat the load. This feels absurdly slow for two weeks and then it doesn't.

WHY 5 × 5, NOT 3 × 5

Two extra sets at the same load is the cheapest strength you can buy at this stage, more practice at the position, more tendon exposure, no extra intensity. Five sets is also where grip usually announces itself first.

WHY THE LAST SET MATTERS

Set 5 is the honest one. If sets 1–4 look identical and set 5 falls apart, your load is right and your work capacity isn't there yet. Hold the load another session; don't drop the sets.

Track these four numbers every heavy session

- **External load**, what's on the belt.
- **Bodyweight**, measured the same time of day, once a week.
- **Total System Weight**, the sum, and the number you actually compare.
- **Reps in reserve on set 5**, the early warning signal for everything else.

SECTION 05 • BLOCK TWO

Weeks 5–8 • Intensify

Triples on the heavy day at a higher load, then two back-off sets to keep the volume. The top set gets heavier; the total work stays roughly the same.

WEEK	TOP SETS	BACK-OFF	RIR (TOP)	LOAD VS WEEK 4
5	4 × 3	2 × 6	3	+8%
6	4 × 3	2 × 6	2	+10%
7	5 × 3	2 × 5	1–2	+12%
8	3 × 3	1 × 5	4	Deload -25%

Back-off sets use roughly 85% of the day's top-set external load. These percentages are of **external load**, not Total System Weight, so check p.3 before deciding they sound small.

WHEN A PERCENTAGE DOESN'T LAND ON A PLATE

85% of 4 kg is 3.4 kg, and no plate makes that. Round down to the smallest increment you own, and when rounding swallows the adjustment, change the movement instead: back-off sets within one plate of the top set are done at bodyweight, and a week 8 deload worth less than a plate means the same sets and reps at bodyweight or band-assisted.

Week 8 is a deload, not a week off

Same movements, same days, meaningfully less of everything, well away from failure. You arrive in week 9 with the strength you built and none of the fatigue that was hiding it.

Reading the block

IF THIS HAPPENS	DO THIS
Triples feel easier than the 5 × 5 did	Normal: lower reps at higher load is less fatiguing per set. Resist adding more than the table says.
You miss the third rep of set 4	Stop the top sets there, do the back-offs as written, repeat the same load next session.
Dips are climbing, pull-ups aren't	Expected. They progress at different rates. Never yoke them to the same load or the same jump.
Grip fails before the target muscles	Go to p.9. This is the most common limiter in this block and it has a fix.

SECTION 06 · BLOCK THREE

Weeks 9–12 · Peak

Three waves, one deload, one test day. The loads here are the heaviest of the block and the volume is the lowest. That combination only works because of the eight weeks underneath it.

WEEK	TOP SET	SUPPORTING	RIR	LOAD VS WEEK 7
9	3 × 3	2 × 5	2	+2%
10	3 × 2	2 × 5	1–2	+5%
11	2 × 5	2 × 5	4	Deload -30%
12	Test	--	0	See below

Week 11 has week 8's rounding problem: if 30% off is less than one plate, deload the movement instead (p.7).

Week 12 · Test day

STEP	WHAT YOU DO
Days 1–3	Full rest. Nothing. Not "just a few pull-ups".
Warm-up	Hangs, then bodyweight singles, then three ramp singles at 50%, 70%, 85% of your intended top load.
Test 1	Weighted pull-up, heaviest clean single. Two attempts maximum, 5 minutes apart.
Test 2	Weighted dip, heaviest clean single. Same rules.
Test 3	Bodyweight pull-up max, at least 10 minutes after the loaded work.
Record	All three, plus bodyweight, plus Total System Weight for each single.

TWO ATTEMPTS, NOT FIVE

Failed attempts add fatigue without teaching you anything. If the second attempt misses, the first one is your number, and it's a real number. Chasing a third and fourth attempt is how a test day turns into an injury day.

What comes after week 12

Run the whole thing again from your new numbers, that's the intended use, and most people get two or three productive cycles before they need to change the structure. If your bodyweight pull-up max is now past 15, your limiter has shifted from load to reps and the next page is the better use of the next three months.

SECTION 07

Grip: the limiter you'll meet first

Grip is rarely the reason you can't get strong, but it is very often the reason a set ends. Once weight hangs from a bar, the hand becomes the weak link in weighted pull-ups, towel work, hangs and high-volume pulling.

Where grippers fit, and where they don't

Grippers make the fingers close against resistance, which is genuinely different from holding a bar. They're portable, easy to standardise if you use the same model and closing depth, and usable isometrically. Their real limitation: they train the thumb poorly. If you want complete lower-arm conditioning, grippers alone are not enough.

RULE	DETAIL
Start submaximal	Pick a gripper you can close for multiple clean reps on both hands. Jumping to one that only moves halfway teaches nothing.
Low volume	Two or three work sets per hand is enough for most people.
Failure is rare	Max attempts are tests. Most of your work should look repeatable.
Placement	After pulling, or on a separate light day. Never heavy grip work before heavy pull-ups.
Technique	Handle deep in the palm, fingers wrapped, drive the fingers into the palm without bending the wrist. Close and open under control.

Three alternatives that carry over better

TOWEL HANGS

Transfers directly to pulling. Hang from towels over a bar; keep feet on the floor to scale the load and gradually take more bodyweight. If thumbs-up irritates you, try gripping with thumbs facing you.

FINGER-PAD PUSH-UPS

Conditions the fingers and the extensor side. Pads, not tips. Spread the fingers, thumb straight or slightly arched. Start on a wall. Keep it to 2–3 sets of about 3 reps, under 5, so it stays finger work.

RIVAL HANDS

Closing is half the job; fingers also need to open. Place one hand over the other's fingers, press down, then open against that pressure. Move only the fingers. 3–4 sets of 6–8, controlled.

THE FIVE GRIP MISTAKES

Thinking grippers are required. Jumping to a gripper that only half-closes. Training closing strength and ignoring finger extension. High-rep grip work before heavy pull-ups. Ignoring pain in the wrist, thumb or elbow, progress by adding clean reps first, then a longer squeeze or a slower opening phase. Better reps beat louder resistance.

This page is deliberately paper-only: none of it needs a log. Two or three honest sets after pulling is the whole prescription.

Source: "Unlock Insane Grip Strength: Don't Use Hand Grippers Until You Watch This!", youtube.com/watch?v=uDHQjdeChIk

SECTION 08

When reps are the limiter

If your bodyweight max is stuck in the low teens, more belt weight isn't the answer. Two rep-focused blocks, to run instead of the loading program - not alongside it.

Method 1 • The Armstrong program

Five days a week, built on one split: a maximum effort set (as many as possible) versus a training set (deliberately smaller, calibrated from your own performance). Not every set is supposed to be a max.

DAY	SESSION
1	Five maximum-effort sets, 90 seconds rest. Fatigue accumulates fast, on purpose.
2	Pyramid: 1 rep, rest 10s; 2 reps, rest 20s; 3 reps, rest 30s, adding one rep and ten seconds until you miss. Then one final max set.
3	Nine training sets, 60s rest: three overhand, three close-grip chin-ups, three wide. If your max is 10, a training set might be 1–2 reps. It should feel too easy.
4	Overhand pull-ups, repeat your training set with 60s rest until you miss. This calibrates day 3: if you sail far past nine sets, raise the training-set reps.
5	Repeat whichever day exposed your weakest link.

The original also adds daily max push-up sets, hours away from the pull-up work.

Method 2 • The 22-day density block

More aggressive: five four-day cycles plus two final test days. Each cycle opens with a test, then builds volume and conditions the supporting muscles: brachialis, forearms, grip.

DAY	SESSION
1	Test: warm up, one max set, rest 2 min, then a five-minute AMRAP resting as needed. Record two numbers, the max set, and max + AMRAP total.
2	Chin-ups for 2× your max, rest 2 min, then pull-ups for ~140% of your max.
3	Commando pull-ups for 2× your max, rest 2 min, then pull-ups for ~150% of your max.
4	Dead hang for time (record it), rest 2 min, then pull-ups for ~160% of your max.

Non-testing days never go to failure. Rest 10–20 seconds before a rep becomes doubtful. Retest each cycle and recalculate from the new max.

THE HONEST TIMELINE

In the source behind this guide, 9 to 19 pull-ups took months, roughly fifteen focused training weeks, not one 22-day block. It came from planned exposure, enough volume and honest logging, not from testing max reps whenever motivation showed up.

Source: "Multiply Your Pull-Ups: 3 Transformative Workouts for Quick Results", youtube.com/watch?v=8e_QTvRkTyM

SECTION 09

Troubleshooting

Loaded pulling fails in predictable ways. Almost all of them are load-selection problems wearing a disguise.

SYMPTOM	MOST LIKELY CAUSE & FIX
Elbow ache on the inside, 2–3 days after heavy pulling	The classic weighted-calisthenics warning. Reduce load, range and frequency before it becomes a layoff, not after. Drop Day 3's loaded work first. Pain that changes your technique is not something to train through.
Load stalled for three sessions	Check the percentage, not the kilos (p.3). A 2.5 kg jump on a 70 kg lifter is 3.5%, that's a real jump, not a small one. Halve the increment before you change the program.
Set 1 strong, sets 4–5 collapse	Work capacity, not strength. Hold the load, keep all five sets, and let the last set improve over two or three weeks.
Bodyweight pull-ups got worse	Normal mid-block if Day 2 volume slipped. Loaded work does not maintain rep capacity on its own. Restore the volume day before adding any load.
Biceps stiff, back feels tight	High-frequency pulling accumulates tension. Stretching and recovery aren't decoration here, they're part of surviving the block.
Everything feels heavy including the warm-up	Take the deload early. It works from any week and costs you far less than pushing through.

What comes next: the muscle-up

Weighted chin-ups are one of the few ways to build the pulling height a muscle-up needs, high enough that the triceps start to get involved near the top. If that's your goal, the pattern is: power first, grip and transition practice second, full attempts last. The biggest mistake is testing full reps too often; failed attempts add fatigue without teaching the transition.

SECTION 10

Twelve-week log

Bodyweight, external load, and the number that matters. TSW = bodyweight + external load, fill it in every week, even when it feels obvious.

WEEK	BODY KG	PULL-UP LOAD	PULL-UP TSW	DIP LOAD	DIP TSW	BW MAX	NOTES
1							
2							
3							
4							
5							
6							
7							
8							
9							
10							
11							
12							

The bodyweight column is not decoration. A Total System Weight recorded without the bodyweight it was measured at cannot be checked later, and week 1 stops being comparable to week 12 the moment you gain or lose a couple of kilos.

Written and published by THYMOS, a training log for people who keep records. This block is available in the app as a twelve-week program, with Total System Weight worked out per set, useful if you would rather not do the arithmetic, and entirely optional. [thymos.fit](#)