



HEAVY LIFTING GUIDE

LIFT SMARTER.
GET STRONGER.
BUILD SHAPE.



SANDRA GAEMMERLER, MS, RD/LD, EP-C

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This guide makes heavy lifting feel simple and safe. You'll learn what "lifting heavy" actually means, how to choose the right weights, and how to progress week to week without wrecking your joints or your schedule.

Your 10-minute setup:

- Pick your 3–4 main lifts for the month (see "Main Lifts")
- Use RPE (=Ratings of Perceived Exertion) to choose weights (Effort Scale)
- Use the warm-up + form checklist before heavy sets
- Pick one progression method for 4 weeks
- Track your lifts to build momentum

Safety note: If you're pregnant, recently postpartum, or managing pain/injury, get clearance and modify as needed. Form > load.

WHAT "LIFTING HEAVY" ACTUALLY MEANS

Lifting heavy does not mean using the same weight for every exercise or maxing out daily. It means using a weight that's challenging for the rep range you're doing, while keeping good technique and leaving 1–3 reps in the tank most of the time.

Simple definition:

- Heavy = challenging for that exercise and that rep range
- Different exercises use different weights (hip thrust ≠ lateral raise)
- Most sets end with solid form and 1–3 reps left (not failure)

Why heavy lifting works:

- Builds muscle (shape) + strength (performance)
- Improves body composition (the "toned" look)
- Supports bone density and long-term health
- Makes everyday life easier (kids, posture, carrying, life)



WARM-UP

(5–10 MINUTES THAT ACTUALLY HELPS)

A good warm-up isn't random cardio—it prepares your joints and nervous system for what you're about to lift.

The 3-step warm-up:

1. Body Temp (2–3 min): walk/bike/row to increase body temperature
2. Mobilize (2–3 moves): hips/T-spine/shoulders, 8–10 reps each
3. Activate Glutes (2–3 min): Pick 1–2 activation drills to “wake up” the muscles that keep you stable and strong. Do 1–2 sets of 8–12 reps.
 - a. Lower Body: Lateral Band Walks, Monster Walks
 - b. Upper Body: (Scapular Push-ups, Band Pull-aparts)
4. Warm-Up Sets (2–4 ramp-up sets): lighter → heavier on your first lift
 - Ramp-up example (squat day):
 - Empty bar x 8
 - ~50% x 5
 - ~65% x 3
 - ~75% x 1–2, then begin Working sets

Rule: The warm-up should make you feel better, not tired. If you're sweating and gassed, you did too much.

EXAMPLES OF VARIOUS MOBILITY EXERCISES

Hip

- 90/90 Hip Switches (controlled rotations; sit tall)
- World's Greatest Stretch (lunge + elbow to instep + rotation)
- Banded
- Cossack Squat to Stand (gentle side-to-side depth)

T-Spine (mid-back)

- Open Books (side-lying rotations; keep knees stacked)
- Thread the Needle (quadruped rotation; reach under + open up)
- Foam Roller T-Spine Extensions (3–5 slow extensions over roller)
- Quadruped T-Spine Rotations (hand behind head; rotate elbow up)



Shoulder

- Wall Slides (8–10 reps; ribs down, slide slow)
- Banded External Rotations (elbow at side; 10–12/side)
- Doorway Pec Stretch (20–30 sec; don't crank shoulder forward)
- Bench Lat Stretch (prayer stretch) (20–30 sec; breathe into ribs)

PICK YOUR MAIN LIFTS (3–4 ANCHORS)

Your main lifts are your strength anchors. You repeat them weekly so you can progress. Then you add 2–4 accessory moves to build muscle, fix weak links, and protect joints.

Choose 3–4 main lifts to focus on for 4 weeks:

- Squat pattern (back squat, front squat, goblet squat, leg press)
- Hinge pattern (deadlift, RDL, trap bar, hip hinge variations)
- Glute focus (hip thrust, glute bridge, split squat)
- Horizontal push (bench, DB press, push-ups)
- Horizontal pull (row variations)
- Vertical push/pull (overhead press, pull-downs)

My main lifts:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

Simple week example:

- Day 1: Lower (squat + glutes)
- Day 2: Upper (push + pull)
- Day 3: Lower (hinge + glutes)
- Optional Day 4: Full body + conditioning



HOW HARD SHOULD YOUR SETS BE?

(RPE MADE EASY)

RPE = Rate of Perceived Exertion

It's how hard a set feels based on how many clean reps you could still do at the end of the set. RPE helps you pick the right weight today and progress safely over time.

The RPE Scale (Reps in Reserve)

- RPE 6 = 4+ reps left → warm-ups / easy days
- RPE 7 = ~3 reps left → technique focus
- RPE 8 = ~2 reps left → most working sets (your sweet spot)
- RPE 9 = ~1 rep left → last set / occasional push
- RPE 10 = 0 reps left → failure (rarely needed)

Rule: RPE only counts if reps are clean. If form breaks, the set is done.

Pick a rep range + target RPE before you lift

- Main lifts (squat, hinge, hip thrust, press, row):
 - Most sets: RPE 8
 - Optional last set: RPE 9 (only if form stays sharp)
- Accessory lifts (split squats, lunges, hamstrings, glutes, back, shoulders):
 - Most sets: RPE 8–9
- Technique days /deload weeks:
 - RPE 6–7

The Golden Rules

1. Clean reps first. Form is the standard, not the weight.
2. Most work = RPE 8. That's where progress happens without burnout.



HOW TO PROGRESS

Progressive overload = gradually making training harder so you adapt.
Pick one method for 4 weeks. Keep it boring. Boring works.

Pick ONE progression method:

- Add reps: same weight, +1 rep/week until top of range
- Add weight: same reps, add 2.5–10 lb when form is solid
- Add a set: only if recovery is good
- Better quality: same numbers, better depth/control/tempo

Example (8–10 rep range):

- Week 1: 3 x 8 of same weight at RPE 8
- Week 2: 3 x 9 of same weight at RPE 8
- Week 3: 3 x 10 of same weight at RPE 8
- Week 4: add weight, back to 3 x 8

RECOVERY RULES

Heavy lifting is a stress. You get stronger when you recover.

The Big 3:

- **Sleep:** aim for 7+ hours when possible; protect a consistent wake time
- **Protein:** include a protein anchor 3–4 meals/day for repair
- **Steps + mobility:** light movement on off days improves recovery

Signs you need to pull back:

- Performance drops for 2+ sessions in a row
- Aches that worsen (not normal soreness)
- Sleep quality tanks or motivation crashes

Adjustments: reduce load 5–10%, remove 1 set, or swap to a joint-friendly variation.



COMMON HEAVY LIFTING MISTAKES

(AND FIXES)

- Going to failure every set → train mostly at RPE 7–9
- Changing exercises weekly → repeat main lifts for 4 weeks
- Skipping warm-ups → use the 3-step warm-up + ramp-ups
- Ego lifting (form breaks) → reduce weight and own the rep
- Too much volume too soon → start with 2–3 working sets and earn more

SAMPLE HEAVY LIFTING WEEK

(3 DAYS + OPTIONL 4TH)

Day 1: Lower (squat + glutes)

1. Back Squat – 3–4 sets x 5–8 reps @ RPE 8
2. Hip Thrust (barbell or machine) – 3 sets x 8–10 reps @ RPE 8
3. Bulgarian Split Squat – 2–3 sets x 8–10/side @ RPE 8–9
4. Leg Curl (machine or sliders) – 2–3 sets x 10–12 @ RPE 9
5. Hip Abductor Machine – 2 sets x 10–15 @ RPE 8

Day 2: Upper (push + pull)

1. Dumbbell Bench Press – 3 sets x 6–10 @ RPE 8
2. One-Arm Dumbbell Row – 3 sets x 8–12/side @ RPE 8
3. Lat Pulldown (or assisted pull-up) – 3 sets x 8–12 @ RPE 8–9
4. Overhead Press (DB or machine) – 2–3 sets x 6–10 @ RPE 8
5. Face Pulls (band or cable) – 2–3 sets x 12–15 @ RPE 8–9
6. Biceps Curl + Triceps Pressdown – 2 sets each x 10–15 @ RPE 8–9

Day 3: Lower (hinge + glutes)

1. Romanian Deadlift – 3–4 sets x 6–10 @ RPE 8
2. Front-Foot Elevated Reverse Lunge – 3 sets x 8–10/side @ RPE 8–9
3. Hip Thrust Variation (pause reps OR single-leg) – 3 sets x 10–12 @ RPE 8
4. Back Extension (glute bias) – 2–3 sets x 10–12 @ RPE 8–9
5. Cable Kickbacks – 2 sets x 10–15 @ RPE 8



Optional Day 4: Full body + conditioning

Strength

1. Trap Bar Deadlift (or Goblet Squat) – 3 sets x 5–8 @ RPE 7–8
2. Incline DB Press – 3 sets x 8–10 @ RPE 8
3. Seated Cable Row – 3 sets x 10–12 @ RPE 8
4. Walking Lunges (or Step-Ups) – 2 sets x 10–12/side @ RPE 8
5. Farmer Carries – 4 x 30–45 sec (heavy, controlled)

Conditioning (pick one, 10–15 min):

- Sled pushes (8–10 rounds, 20–30 sec work / 60–90 sec rest)
- Bike intervals (10 rounds, 20 sec hard / 100 sec easy)
- Zone 2 incline walk (15–25 min steady)

THE HEAVY LIFTING MINDSET

Heavy lifting works when you stop treating workouts like a test and start treating them like a practice. Your job isn't to crush every session—it's to show up, lift with great form, and stack small wins week after week. That's why this guide keeps things simple: repeat your main lifts, train most sets around **RPE 7–9**, and progress with one method at a time. When you feel great, you earn heavier weights. When life gets chaotic, you still train—just lighter, shorter, or with your “minimum” version. Consistency beats intensity, every time.

Before you start each week, ask: **What can I realistically commit to?** Then protect that commitment. Track your main lifts, celebrate progress that isn't just the scale (reps, form, confidence, energy), and remember: the strongest women aren't the ones who never miss—they're the ones who always come back. If you want help turning this into a personalized plan—built around your goals, your schedule, and your equipment—I'm here to coach you through it so you can lift heavy, feel powerful, and keep it sustainable.



Want this personalized?

If you want a clear plan (food structure + training + accountability) that fits your life, I can help you implement this without overwhelm.

Choose your next step:

- 1:1 Nutrition Coaching – personalized plan + check-ins
- Gym Dietitian Program – structure + community + progress tracking
- Starter Session – one-time roadmap + next steps

Book your consult or DM me 'GOALS' on Instagram @dietitian.sandra!



Note: This guide is for education and does not replace medical advice. If you are pregnant, postpartum, or managing a medical condition, talk with your healthcare provider about what is appropriate for you.

Sandra Gaemmerler, MS, RD/LD
dietitiansandra@gmail.com
www.dietitiansandra.com