

9 Compound Leg Exercises That Should Be In Every Program

Here are the 9 best compound leg exercises:

1. **High Bar Back Squat**
2. **Trap Bar Deadlift**
3. **Bulgarian Split Squat**
4. **Snatch Grip Romanian Deadlift**
5. **Wall Reference Romanian Deadlift**
6. **Front Foot Elevated Reverse Lunge**
7. **Heel Elevated Goblet Squat**
8. **Barbell Hip Thrust**
9. **Walking Lunges**

9 Best Compound Leg Exercises

1. High Bar Back Squat

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fR9MmJn4LwM&ab_channel=MovementEnhanced

The high bar back squat is a must in any leg compound workout. It's one of the most utilized leg exercises across different populations. Powerlifters, weightlifters, CrossFitters, and sports athletes use it to build leg strength. Bodybuilders and general gym-goers use it to develop muscle mass in their quadriceps.

What Muscles Are Activated

The muscles that are activated in the high bar back squat are:

- Quadriceps
- Hip adductors (inner thighs)
- Glutes

Why You Should Do The High Bar Back Squat

- **It allows you to leverage high-intensity loads.** The form of the barbell squat is one of the best exercises to move the highest amount of loads, particularly on your leg and hip

muscles, while moving through a large range of motion. This is useful if you want to increase maximum strength and be able to deal with high loads.

- **It does not require as much shoulder mobility.** Most people have the shoulder mobility needed to do a high bar back squat. You can take a narrower grip if you have better mobility or a wider grip if you have poorer mobility. It is not as demanding on the shoulders when compared to a low bar back squat where the barbell is lower down your back or a front squat where you have to keep your elbows high and rest the barbell on the front of your shoulders.

How To Do It

- Set up a barbell on a squat rack with the J hook set to armpit height and load the desired weight on your barbell with clips secured tightly on each end.
- Grab the barbell with a grip that will be as close to your shoulders as possible while still being comfortable. The narrower the grip, the tighter your upper back will be, which will be beneficial for stability. You do not want to go so narrow that you feel pain and discomfort in your elbows.
- Walk underneath the barbell and position your traps (the muscles at the base of your neck and top of your upper back) underneath the middle with your feet and hips directly underneath it.
- Stand the barbell up and take 2 to 3 steps back and out of the rack with your feet set in a shoulder-width stance and pointed out ever so slightly between 10 to 20 degrees.
- Take a deep breath into your core and brace hard with the Valsalva maneuver. To perform the Valsalva maneuver, simultaneously attempt to forcefully exhale while keeping airways closed.
- Break at your hips and knees and sit down until your hip crease is below the top of your knees or as deep as you can go with your back staying flat.
- Forcefully stand back up until your knees and hips are extended and exhale.
- Repeat for the desired number of repetitions.

Wondering what the differences are between high bar back squats and low bar back squats? Check out [Olympic Squat vs Powerlifting Squat: Differences, Pros, Cons](#).

How To Program It

As this is a strength exercise, I recommend including lower reps for the high bar back squat with the rep range of 1 to 8 so you can use higher intensities. I would recommend training the back squat between 75% to 90% of your 1 rep max.

With higher intensities, you can easily activate the main muscle fibers that are responsible for most of your strength and size gains. There is no need to train each set close to failure, so I would leave at least 2 to 4 reps short of failure.

Performing reps until you're just short of failure is also referred to as RIR training, or reps in reserve. Learn more about how to do it effectively in [RPE vs RIR: What Are The Differences? How To Use Them?](#)

2. Trap Bar Deadlift

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VNgxEhOoOjo&ab_channel=HowtoBeast

The [trap bar deadlift](#) is one of the top compound leg exercises that can leverage the most amount of weight. It is commonly used by various types of athletes and gym-goers and can increase strength in the legs and the posterior chain muscles in the upper body. This includes the back extensors, lats, and traps.

What Muscles Are Activated

The muscles that are activated in the trap bar deadlift are:

- Quadriceps
- Hip adductors (inner thighs)
- Hamstrings
- Glutes
- Back extensors (the back muscles that allow you to stand up straight)
- Lats (the large, flat muscles on either side of your back that extend to below your arm)
- Traps (muscles that extend over the back of the neck and shoulders)

Why You Should Do The Trap Bar Deadlift

- **It allows you to leverage high-intensity loads.** Like the high bar back squat, the trap bar deadlift is also one of the best exercises to move the highest amount of loads, particularly on your leg and hip muscles. This is also a useful standardized test for lower body strength as opposed to a back squat where squat depth may be inconsistent.
- **It does not require as much hip mobility and glute and hamstring flexibility.** The trap bar deadlift allows you to position your hips and knees in the position where you are most mobile and strongest. If you do not have as much [hip mobility](#) or if you are stronger in the quads, you have the freedom to move your knees more forward. If you are stronger in your hips, you can move your hips back more.
- **It's effective at training quads, glutes, hamstrings, and hip adductors.** The trap bar deadlift is also very effective at training the quads, glutes, hamstrings, and hip adductors. You can change which muscle groups you emphasize more by changing your body positioning. The more forward your knees are, the more you train your quads. The more backward your hips are, the more you train the glutes and hamstrings.

How To Do It

- Stand in the middle of a trap bar loaded with your desired load.

- Bend at your hips and knees and lower your arms to be able to reach the handles while maintaining a flat lower back.
- While keeping the ends of the barbell in line with your shoulders and pressure across mid-foot, grab onto the handles.
- Take a deep breath into your core and brace hard.
- Gradually push your legs into the ground while keeping your chest tall until the trap bar comes off the floor.
- Stand up with your legs and hips locked out and exhale.
- Inhale as you lower the bar back down to the floor.
- Repeat for the desired number of repetitions.

How To Program It

This is a good strength exercise, but it can also be a very useful exercise to build muscular endurance or muscle hypertrophy.

If you are looking to train for strength, I would recommend you focus on training in the 1 to 6 rep range. Keep at least 4 to 5 repetitions in reserve.

If you are looking to build muscular endurance or muscle hypertrophy, try to use between 8 to 20 repetitions, and keep between 2 to 3 repetitions in reserve.

Want to learn more about the trap bar deadlift and how it compares to other leg exercises? Check out [Trap Bar Deadlift vs Front Squat: Differences, Pros, Cons](#).

3. Bulgarian Split Squat

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2C-uNgKwPLE&ab_channel=ScottHermanFitness

The Bulgarian split squat is one of the best compound leg exercises with dumbbells. It's a very good unilateral (single-leg) compound exercise that primarily trains the quads and glutes.

What Muscles Are Activated

The muscles that are activated in the Bulgarian split squat are:

- Quadriceps
- Hamstrings
- Hip adductors (inner thighs)
- Glutes

Why You Should Do The Bulgarian Split Squat

- **It improves hip shift in squats.** If you have obvious strength imbalances in your lower body, you may have what is called a [hip shift](#) in your bilateral exercises (exercises that train both sides simultaneously). A hip shift is when your hips shift to the left or the right

of your body when you squat. Bulgarian split squats will do a really good job at fixing these strength asymmetries in your lower body.

- **It focuses on the quadriceps and glutes.** The Bulgarian split squat does a good job at focusing on the quadriceps and the glutes one side at a time, and you can change your stance if you want to focus on one muscle group over the other. You can activate your quads more by bringing your front foot closer towards yourself so you bend at the knees more. You can keep the focus more on the glutes by moving your front foot further out in front of you.

How To Do It

- First, set up a free-weight bench or an exercise step behind you and position one foot on top of the bench or step.
- Make sure you stand about 2 to 3 feet away from the bench or step with your front foot facing forward.
- Pick up a pair of dumbbells in both hands and make sure that your hips and torso are facing forward. Make sure that your back hip is extended (i.e. you're standing completely upright) and your spine is flat.
- Bend at your knees until your back knee touches the floor and allow your front knee to go towards your toes. Inhale as you descend to the bottom position.
- Drive through your midfoot and stand back up to your starting position, exhaling as you ascend.
- Repeat for the desired number of repetitions, then change sides to execute the same number of repetitions for the other side.

How To Program It

If you are looking for one of the best leg compound exercises to build general muscle strength and size, I recommend performing the Bulgarian split squats between 6 to 12 repetitions, leaving 1 to 2 repetitions short of failure.

If you are looking to fix any strength asymmetries, I would still recommend performing the Bulgarian split squats between 6 to 12 repetitions but leaving 5 or more repetitions short of failure. This is so you can train your weaker leg hard enough that it can catch up without maximizing the stimulus on your stronger leg.

If you're looking to make Bulgarian split squats easier or more challenging, try these [Bulgarian split squat progressions](#).

4. Snatch Grip Romanian Deadlift

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HpJvTfDFnWE&ab_channel=PriorityStrength

The snatch grip Romanian deadlift is one of the best compound exercises that you can do for your hamstrings and other lower body muscle groups. As with most types of deadlifts, it can be used to [target your legs and back at the same time](#).

This variation is more popular among the [Olympic weightlifting](#) communities but is hugely useful for powerlifters, bodybuilders, and general gym-goers.

What Muscles Are Activated

The muscles that are activated in the snatch grip Romanian deadlift are:

- Hamstrings
- Hip adductors (inner thighs)
- Glutes
- Back extensors (the back muscles that allow you to stand up straight)

Why You Should Do The Snatch Grip Romanian Deadlift

- **It's superior for hamstring and glute training.** The [Romanian deadlift](#) is generally a very good pure [hip hinging exercise](#) that targets the hamstring and glutes. By performing the Romanian deadlift with a snatch grip or a wide grip, the barbell can travel down your legs more. Therefore, you move through more range of motion in your hips. By maximizing your range of motion through your hips, you maximize the stretch in your glutes and hamstrings and allow them to grow.

How To Do It

- Load a barbell with your desired weight and grab onto it with a grip wide enough that the barbell aligns with your hip crease when you are standing upright.
- Stand up with the barbell and keep your shoulders down with your abs tight.
- With a soft bend in your knees, bend your hips and push them back behind you as you slide the barbell down your thighs.
- Keep your armpits above the barbell at all times and do not let your knees go forward.
- Inhale as you descend.
- When your back reaches parallel or when the barbell touches the floor (whichever happens first), stand back up and thrust your hips through.
- Make sure your knees and hips lock out simultaneously and exhale as you reach upright.
- Repeat for the desired number of repetitions.

How To Program It

For the snatch grip Romanian deadlift, you can load a moderately heavy amount of weight through your glutes and hamstrings. However, I would not recommend pushing towards very high intensities because you may risk straining your back if you suddenly lose concentration.

I would recommend training between 6 to 10 repetitions and leaving 3 to 4 repetitions in reserve.

You can also do regular deadlifts with a snatch grip to target the upper back more and work on your grip strength. Learn more in [Snatch Grip Deadlift: What Is It? How-To, Benefits, Muscles](#).

5. Wall Reference Romanian Deadlift

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wxRMRiyZlvc&ab_channel=MohammedUmar

The wall reference Romanian deadlift is one of my favorite unilateral (single-side) leg exercises that effectively activates the hamstrings, glutes, and adductors.

What Muscles Are Activated

The muscles that are activated in the wall reference Romanian deadlift are:

- Hamstrings
- Hip adductors (inner thighs)
- Glutes

Why You Should Do The Wall Reference Romanian Deadlift

- **It improves hip shift in pulling exercises.** The wall reference Romanian deadlift is very effective at isolating the tension through one side of your hip muscles, including the glutes, hamstrings, and hip adductors. If you have a hip shift in posterior chain-focused or [hip dominant exercises](#) such as [barbell rows](#) and deadlifts, the wall reference Romanian deadlift can help strengthen each side of the hip independently.
- **It improves hip mobility.** If you do not hinge through your hips well or you round your back in deadlifts or barbell rows, the wall reference Romanian deadlift is good at teaching you how to hinge through your hips. You can perform this exercise with no weight at all to begin with. Many beginners will struggle with hinging through their hips by simply bending their hips backward as opposed to bowing their torso forward.

How To Do It

- First, place one foot against the bottom of the wall and stand your other foot about 2 to 3 feet away from the wall. Ensure that your rear foot is off to the side and not directly behind your front foot.
- Hold onto a chosen dumbbell or weight with the contralateral arm, which is the arm opposite the front foot.
- Rotate the side of the pelvis of your rear leg slightly towards the front leg. This is called a hip shift. If your right leg is forward, then your pelvis will rotate clockwise.
- Start with a soft bend in your hips and knees and keep the pressure on the foot between mid-foot and heels.
- Inhale as you push your hips backward and lower the dumbbell down the front of your front leg until your back is parallel.
- Exhale as you thrust your hips through and stand back up to your starting position.
- Repeat for the desired number of repetitions and repeat the same process for the opposite leg.

How To Program It

I recommend performing 8 to 12 repetitions, but I would advise not going too hard on this exercise as you may risk straining your back if you cannot control the weight. I recommend leaving at least 5 repetitions in reserve in each set.

6. Front Foot Elevated Reverse Lunge

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rOJg_hDi3Os&ab_channel=BarbellShrugged

The front foot elevated reverse lunge is another great unilateral (single-side) compound movement for the legs with particular emphasis on the quads, adductors, and hamstrings.

What Muscles Are Activated

The muscles that are activated in the front foot elevated reverse lunge are:

- Quadriceps
- Hamstrings
- Hip adductors (inner thighs)
- Glutes

Why You Should Do The Front Foot Elevated Reverse Lunge

- **It focuses on loading the hamstrings, adductors, and quads.** The front foot elevated reverse lunge is a great split squat variation that focuses on the hips more than the knees. This is useful for those who want to improve their ability to [squat deeper](#) in a back squat because the front foot elevated reverse lunge replicates a similar range of motion as a deep squat.
- **It improves hip shifting in squatting exercises.** This exercise is useful to also improve hip shifting in squatting-type exercises. It will emphasize the hip of the front leg when it is performed, and strengthening the hips individually can improve weaknesses on each side and prevent you from leaning to one side when you squat.

What you can do is perform more on the side that you shift away from. So if you hip shift to the right, you can perform more sets with a front foot elevated reverse lunge with your left hip forward.

How To Do It

- Stand on top of a low exercise step with a pair of dumbbells in your hands.
- Take one step back, making sure that the rear foot points forward.
- Squat down and keep the front knee in line with the front foot. Avoid letting the front [knee pass the toes](#). When you squat down, make sure the back knee is below your pelvis.
- Go down as low as your mobility allows you to or touch your knee onto the floor.
- Push from both legs and stand your rear foot back up onto the exercise step.

- Repeat the process for the same foot for the prescribed number of repetitions, then switch over to the other foot.

How To Program It

If you are looking to build strength and muscle mass without major strength asymmetries, I recommend performing between 6 to 12 repetitions with 1 to 2 repetitions short of failure.

If you do have strength asymmetries, I would still recommend performing between 6 to 12 repetitions but leaving at least 5 or more repetitions short of failure. This is so you can train your weaker leg hard enough that it can catch up without letting your stronger leg get ahead.

7. Heel Elevated Goblet Squat

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6cmBiDXgvCk&ab_channel=ChristySenay%7CUnchainedStrength

The heel elevated [goblet squat](#) is a great [dumbbell leg exercise](#) that is suitable for beginners but is far from ineffective for advanced trainers. Due to the heel elevation, this is a [quad dominant movement](#).

What Muscles Are Activated

The muscles that are activated in the heel elevated goblet squat are:

- Quadriceps
- Hip adductors (inner thighs)
- Glutes

Why You Should Do The Heel Elevated Goblet Squat

- **It improves squatting mobility and technique.** The heel elevated goblet squat is good at improving mobility for those who have some limited [ankle mobility](#). The heel elevation allows you to let your knees go forward more so you can sit your hips down more, therefore allowing you to squat deeper and train that deeper range of motion.
- **It teaches a neutral posture effectively.** The heel elevated goblet squat is effective for stopping people who over-extend their lower backs in squats. It puts them in a more upright position and teaches them to sit their hips down as opposed to backward.

How To Do It

- Set up a squat ramp to elevate your heels. Stand with your feet about shoulder-width apart and parallel to each other.
- Keep the pressure on your heels and a soft bend in the knees and tuck your hips under slightly to make sure your back is flat.
- Grab onto a dumbbell or kettlebell of your choice and hold it by your chest with the bottom of your palms.

- Inhale as you break at your knees and squat your hips down between your ankles while keeping the pressure firmly through the heels throughout. Be careful not to let your toes come up.
- As you reach the bottom of your range of motion, stand back up until you are fully extended and exhale fully as you ascend.
- Repeat for the prescribed number of repetitions.

How To Program It

If you want to perform the heel elevated goblet squat to improve mobility or to practice squatting technique, I recommend performing 6 to 8 reps with a very light weight. You want to have at least 5 reps in reserve. I would also recommend performing it in a slow [tempo](#) where you would take 3 seconds to ascend and 3 seconds to descend.

If you want to increase muscle mass or muscular endurance, I would recommend performing between 8 to 20 repetitions and leaving 2 to 4 repetitions in reserve.

8. Barbell Hip Thrusts

Barbell hip thrusts are one of the best [compound glute exercises](#). The hip thrust engages all of the gluteal muscles, particularly the gluteus maximus. It's also effective for activation of the hamstrings, quads, calves, hip adductors, and hip abductors, making it a well-rounded compound leg movement.

What Muscles Are Activated?

The main muscles activated in the barbell hip thrust are:

- Glutes
- Hamstrings
- Quads
- Hip abductors

Why Should You Do Barbell Hip Thrusts?

It can be easily loaded to a heavy weight. The barbell hip thrust enables you to load the glutes and continue progressively overloading them. Most people can hip thrust a relatively heavy weight, even if they're unable to squat or deadlift the same amount.

It doesn't require a high level of upper body mobility. Unlike in the barbell squat, the hip thrust doesn't place the wrists or shoulders in compromising positions. Therefore, if you have poor upper body mobility or you experience joint pain when performing the barbell squat, going for a barbell hip thrust might be a better choice.

How To Do It

- Load up a barbell to your desired weight and place it in front of a bench or aerobic step. Roll a mat or towel around the bar to cushion your hips if needed.
- Sit on the floor with your legs extended underneath the barbell and lean back so that your shoulder blades are resting on the bench or step.
- Bend your knees to a comfortable position and drive your heels into the ground as you thrust your hips up toward the ceiling.
- When your hips are fully extended, pause for a second and squeeze your glutes before returning back to the starting position with your hips and the bar on the ground.
- Repeat for the desired number of reps and sets.

How To Program It

I recommend doing 3-4 sets of between 5 and 12 reps. Try to vary your rep range and adjust the weight accordingly to focus on all aspects of power, strength, and endurance in your lower body workouts. Place hip thrusts at the start of your lower body workouts, so you can really push yourself and overload your glutes for maximum progress.

9. Walking Lunges

Walking lunges target all of the lower body muscles, as well as the abdominals and spinal stabilizers. You can perform them with a loaded barbell, dumbbells, or kettlebells, depending on what equipment you've got available. Walking lunges are also suitable and effective as a body weight exercise.

What Muscles Are Activated?

The muscles activated in walking lunges are:

- Quads
- Hamstrings
- Glutes
- Hip abductors
- Hip abductors
- Core

Why Should You Do Walking Lunges?

It's a beginner-friendly exercise. Almost anybody can benefit from doing walking lunges and they're great for lifters of all abilities. You can easily progress or regress the exercise to align with your current strength levels and your workout goals.

Walking lunges improve balance and stability. Because you need to stabilize your whole body when walking forward under load, walking lunges are great for improving your balance and

core stability. They'll also improve your hip, knee, and ankle stability, which can enhance your performance in a range of other weightlifting exercises and cardio training.

How To Do It

- Place a barbell on your upper back, or hold a set of dumbbells or kettlebells, with one in each hand.
- Lunge forward with one leg and lower yourself until both knees are bent at 90 degrees. Keep your core tight and your head up.
- Pushing through your front leg, bring yourself back up to a standing position.
- Without pausing, lunge forward with the other leg and repeat the same motion.
- Continue for the number of reps and sets specified in your program.

How To Program It

I recommend adding 3-4 sets of 10-12 walking lunges in your program. If you're using very light weights or you're just using your body weight, consider doing a higher number of reps (between 12 and 15) to challenge your muscular endurance.

Lower Body Workout Sample

For an effective leg workout, it's best to perform a combination of both isolation and compound lifts for the legs. Below, I've included a workout sample that you can try to target your lower body muscles.

Day 1

- Barbell back squats 3 x 8-10
- Dumbbell Romanian deadlifts 3 x 10
- Dumbbell goblet squats 4 x 12
- Hamstring curl machine 4 x 12

Day 2

- Rest day

Day 3

- Barbell hip thrusts 4 x 5-8
- Reverse lunges 4 x 10
- Hamstring dumbbell curl 4 x 12
- Cable kickbacks 3 x 12

Day 4

- Upper body

Day 5

- Barbell deadlifts 3 x 5-8
- Walking lunges 4 x 12
- Leg press 3 x 10
- Leg extension machine 3 x 12

Day 6

- Rest day

Day 7

- Upper body

Other Lower Body Exercise Guides

- [12 Best Compound Glute Exercises For Muscle Size & Strength](#)
- [Hip Dominant vs Knee Dominant Exercises \(Simple Guide\)](#)
- [20 Exercises To Improve Squat Strength \(That Actually Work\)](#)