

The Chicago High-Rise Apartment Workout

An 8-Week Strength Program
for Your Building Amenity Gym

by Darek Kowal

ACE-Certified Personal Trainer | 10+ Years in Chicago

Trained Chicago professionals in dozens of buildings across South Loop, West Loop, Streeterville, River North, and Gold Coast.

Welcome

If you live in a Chicago high-rise, your building's amenity gym is probably better than you think. The friction isn't the equipment — it's that nobody ever showed you what to do with it.

This is the program I run with most of my in-home clients during their first 8 weeks of training. It builds the foundation a beginner needs and gives an intermediate lifter enough room to progress. It runs in nearly any Chicago high-rise gym — from the 3-floor setup at 1000M to the corner-of-a-room treadmill-and-dumbbells situation in some of the older condo conversions.

Three sessions a week. 35 to 45 minutes per session. Real progress in 8 weeks.

What you'll need

Required:

- A pair of dumbbells (adjustable, or a rack with dumbbells in 5–10 lb increments)
- At least one bench (flat works, adjustable is ideal)
- Floor or mat space (a corner big enough for a plank)

Helpful (but not required):

- Cable machine, smith machine, or kettlebells (for variety later)
- A way to track sets, reps, and weight (use the log on page 9)

How to use this program

Train 3 days a week on non-consecutive days (Monday / Wednesday / Friday is the most common schedule). Rest, walk, or do light cardio on the other days. Each session runs all 5 foundation moves, 60–90 seconds rest between sets. After every 2 weeks, the program changes — sets, reps, and intensity all shift to keep your body adapting.

Track every session in the log starting on page 9. Looking back at your numbers 8 weeks from now is what proves the program works. You can't out-feel data.

The 5 Foundation Moves

Every session uses these same 5 moves. They cover the five fundamental strength patterns — squat, hinge, pull, push, and core. Learn them well in weeks 1–2 and the rest of the program runs on autopilot.

1. Goblet Squat — *Squat pattern*

How: Hold one dumbbell vertically at chest height, like a goblet. Feet just outside shoulder width. Sit your hips back, bend your knees, keep your chest tall. Aim for thighs parallel to the floor.

Form check: If your heels lift off the ground, your ankles are stiff. If your lower back rounds at the bottom, you're going deeper than your hips currently allow.

2. Romanian Deadlift (RDL) — *Hinge pattern*

How: Hold two dumbbells at your sides. Feet hip-width. With a soft bend in your knees, push your hips back like you're closing a car door with your butt. Lower the dumbbells along the front of your legs until you feel a stretch in your hamstrings. Drive your hips forward to stand back up.

Form check: Knees stay soft but mostly still. The movement is at the HIPS, not the knees. If your back rounds, stop lowering.

3. Single-Arm Dumbbell Row — *Pull pattern*

How: Set up with one knee and one hand on a bench. Free hand holds a dumbbell. Let it hang. Pull it up toward your hip, keeping your elbow close to your body. Squeeze your shoulder blade at the top. Lower with control.

Form check: Don't twist your torso to lift the weight. Back stays flat like a tabletop. Work is in your back, not your shoulder.

4. Dumbbell Bench Press — *Push pattern*

How: Lie on a flat or slightly inclined bench. Hold a dumbbell in each hand at chest height, palms forward. Press both up until your arms are nearly straight (don't lock the elbows). Lower with control to chest height.

Form check: Don't bounce the dumbbells off your chest. Pause briefly at the bottom. If your shoulders pinch, incline the bench slightly.

5. Dead Bug — *Core pattern*

How: Lie on your back. Knees lifted to 90 degrees, shins parallel to the floor. Arms straight up over your shoulders. Press your lower back into the floor. Slowly extend your right arm overhead AND your left leg toward the floor at the same time. Return. Switch sides.

Form check: If your lower back arches off the floor, you've gone too far. Pull it back. Speed kills the benefit.

Weeks 1–2: Foundation Phase

Your goal for the next 2 weeks is to nail the form on all 5 moves and get used to the weekly cadence. The weights you use here will feel light. That's intentional. Learning the movement pattern at light weight is what prevents injury at heavy weight.

Exercise	Sets	Reps	Tempo	Intensity
Goblet Squat	3	8–10	3 sec down, 1 sec up	RPE 6–7 (5 reps in reserve)
Romanian Deadlift	3	8–10	3 sec down, 1 sec up	RPE 6–7
Single-Arm DB Row	3 per arm	8–10	Controlled	RPE 6–7
DB Bench Press	3	8–10	3 sec down, 1 sec up	RPE 6–7
Dead Bug	3 per side	8	Slow, deliberate	RPE 5

Weekly schedule

Monday / Wednesday / Friday: Run all 5 moves in order. 60–90 seconds rest between sets. Total time: 40–45 minutes.

Tuesday / Thursday / Saturday / Sunday: Walk, light bike, or rest. If you want extra cardio, 20–30 minutes on the treadmill at an incline counts.

What to watch for

- **If 8 reps feels easy on the last set** — the weight is too light. Add 2.5–5 lbs next session.
- **If your form breaks down on rep 6+** — the weight is too heavy. Drop 5 lbs.
- **You should finish each session feeling like you could've done one more set**, not destroyed. We're building, not testing.

Weeks 3–4: Building Phase

The form should feel natural by now. We add volume — more sets — and bump the intensity a notch. Same 5 moves. Same schedule. Different effort.

Exercise	Sets	Reps	Tempo	Intensity
Goblet Squat	4	8–12	2 sec down, 1 sec up	RPE 7–8 (2–3 reps in reserve)
Romanian Deadlift	4	8–12	2 sec down, 1 sec up	RPE 7–8
Single-Arm DB Row	4 per arm	8–12	Controlled	RPE 7–8
DB Bench Press	4	8–12	2 sec down, 1 sec up	RPE 7–8
Dead Bug	3 per side	10	Slow, deliberate	RPE 6

New tweak: the optional finisher

Starting in week 3, you can add an optional cardio finisher 2 days a week. 15 minutes on the treadmill at a steep incline (10–12%) and a walking pace. Heart rate around 130–150 bpm. This is real conditioning work without trashing your recovery for the next strength session.

Progress check at end of week 4

Look at your training log. Compare the weight you used on goblet squat in week 1 to week 4. You should be using somewhere between 5 and 15 lbs more for the same reps. If you're using less, eat more, sleep more, and stop skipping sessions.

Weeks 5–6: Strength Phase

Time to get strong. Lower reps. Heavier weight. The form work from the first 4 weeks is what makes this phase safe. Three of the five moves get progressed to slightly more challenging variations.

Exercise	Sets	Reps	Tempo	Intensity
Front-Loaded DB Squat	4	5–8	Controlled, drive up hard	RPE 8 (1–2 reps in reserve)
Romanian Deadlift	4	6–8	2 sec down, 1 sec up	RPE 8
3-Point DB Row	4 per arm	6–8	Controlled	RPE 8
Floor Press with Pause	4	6–8	1 sec pause at bottom	RPE 8
Dead Bug	3 per side	10	Slow	RPE 6

New variations explained

Front-Loaded DB Squat

Hold two dumbbells at your shoulders, palms facing each other. Squat the same way you did the goblet squat, but now with a heavier total load. Builds quad strength and forces an even more upright torso. Start with 60–70% of the weight you used on single-DB goblet squat — it'll feel surprisingly heavy.

3-Point DB Row

Same row as before, but instead of one knee on the bench, only your free hand is on the bench. Standing position. Forces more core stability and lets you use a heavier dumbbell. Keep the same back-flat-like-a-tabletop cue.

Floor Press with Pause

Lie on the floor instead of a bench. Hold dumbbells in pressing position. Lower until your upper arms touch the floor (your range of motion is shorter than on a bench — that's the point). Pause for 1 second. Drive up. Builds raw pressing strength and is gentler on the shoulders.

Weeks 7–8: Peak Phase + Test

Week 7 is your heaviest week. Week 8 is your test. After week 8 you'll know — from data, not feel — exactly how much stronger you've gotten in 8 weeks.

Week 7 — Peak

Exercise	Sets	Reps	Intensity
Tempo Goblet Squat	5	4–6	RPE 8–9, 4 sec down
Pause RDL	5	5–6	RPE 8–9, 2 sec pause at bottom
3-Point DB Row	5 per arm	5–6	RPE 8–9
Floor Press with Pause	5	4–6	RPE 8–9
Dead Bug	3 per side	12	Slow

Week 8 — Test Week

This is the payoff. Take the weights you used in **Week 5** for goblet squat, RDL, row, and bench. Do one all-out set per move and see how many reps you can get with good form. Then compare:

If you got more reps with the same weight than you did 3 weeks ago, you got stronger. If you got the same reps but the weight felt easier, you also got stronger. Almost no one ends an 8-week program flat. Most get 3–8 more reps per move at the same weight.

Save your week-8 numbers. They're your new starting point.

What comes after week 8

Most beginners hit a wall around week 8–10 not because their body is done adapting, but because they need a new stimulus — different rep ranges, new movement variations, more accurate weight selection based on their individual strengths and weaknesses. That's where programmed coaching takes you from good results to great results.

If you want a program built specifically around your body, your building, and your schedule, that's what I do. See page 11.

Your Building Gym: Equipment Checklist

Use this checklist next time you walk into your building's amenity gym. Anything in the first column and you can run this entire program. Missing something? See the substitutions.

Required for the program	If your gym doesn't have it
Pair of dumbbells (5–50 lbs)	Bring adjustable dumbbells from home, or substitute bodyweight variations (split squats, push-ups, inverted rows on a sturdy table edge).
Flat or adjustable bench	Use the floor for presses (floor press). Use a step bench or sturdy ottoman for rows.
Open floor or mat space	Almost every gym has this. If yours is genuinely tiny, the program still runs in a 6x6 ft area.
Helpful, not required	How to use them
Cable machine	Substitute for rows (seated cable row). Adds variety in weeks 5–8.
Kettlebells	Substitute for goblet squats and RDLs. Often more comfortable than dumbbells for these moves.
Smith machine	Use for squats and presses if you want to go heavier than dumbbells allow. Not ideal but workable.
TRX / suspension trainer	Substitute for rows (inverted TRX row). Great for variety.

When it's time to upgrade your setup

If your building's gym has none of the required equipment and you've been training consistently for a few months, you have three options:

- **Buy your own.** A set of adjustable dumbbells (5–50 lbs in 5 lb increments) and a small bench fit in a closet and cost about \$400–\$600 total.
- **Join a real gym.** If you're going to drive somewhere, drive somewhere worth driving to.
- **Hire a trainer who brings equipment.** That's me. I show up with dumbbells, bands, kettlebells, suspension trainer, and a program. Your home is the gym.

What's Next?

You finished 8 weeks. Or you're about to. Either way — what comes next is what most beginners get wrong.

The reason most people plateau around week 10–12 isn't that their body is done adapting. It's that they keep running the same beginner program even though their body has progressed beyond it. The right answer is a program built around YOU — your specific strengths, weaknesses, training history, schedule, and goals.

Here's what working with me looks like

- **Free 30-minute consult.** Phone or Zoom. We talk through what you've done, what's worked, what hasn't, and what "success" looks like in 90 days.
- **In-home or building gym sessions.** I come to you. Standard session is \$120 — bulk packages save \$10–\$25 per session.
- **Real programming.** Every session is built around what your body needs that week, with progress reviews every 4–6 weeks.
- **No contracts, no deposits.** If it's not the right fit, you don't owe me anything.

Book Your Free 30-Minute Consult

darekkowalfitness.com/book

Or call/text: 219-484-1992

Service area

South Loop | West Loop | Streeterville | River North | Gold Coast | Central Chicago by request

Consult a qualified healthcare professional prior to beginning any diet or exercise program. This document is for informational and educational purposes only. It is not intended as medical advice or to replace a relationship with a qualified healthcare professional.