



# Outside Options

Too nice of a day to head to the gym? Get a super strength workout outdoors. Your local park or playground provides all the equipment you need.

By [Mark Cohen](#)

At first glance, a playground or park might not look like the best place to get a killer strength workout. After all, these venues don't come stocked with machines, cable stacks and dumbbells. On the other hand, a well-equipped weight room might be the last place you want to be on a fine summer's day, particularly if you've been chained up to a desk all week.

On days like this — when the sun is shining, the breeze is blowing, the birds are chirping, and you can't stand another moment inside, you can take your resistance workout outdoors. And you can build muscle, scorch fat and improve cardiovascular health just by leveraging your own ingenuity and body weight.

Of course, you can do body-weight workouts indoors, too, but there are some distinct benefits to stepping outside. Time spent in natural environments is inherently energizing, for one thing. The sun improves your mood by releasing a burst of serotonin, a happiness-boosting neurotransmitter. In fact, Canadian and Australian researchers found that extra serotonin triggered by sun exposure causes a surge of energy that can help you ditch the need for extra caffeine. And that energy can be directly channeled toward increasing the intensity of your workouts.

What's more, research suggests that a mere five to 30 minutes of sun exposure at least twice weekly increases natural production of vitamin D, a powerhouse that can help prevent osteoporosis, heart disease, diabetes, hypertension, chronic pain, autoimmune diseases and certain cancers.

Whether done inside or outside, body-weight exercises are easy to learn, and variations can be adapted to any fitness level — enough to challenge even the most experienced weightlifter. And if you ask Jon Hinds, body-weight workout guru and owner of Monkey Bar Gymnasium in Madison, Wis., and Chicago, Ill., mixing in the occasional body-weight routine might even help *improve* your more equipment-rich workouts.

"Body-weight movements build your relative strength," says Hinds. "They're a great assessment of your weight-to-strength ratio — and the more easily you can move your own body weight, the better shape you're in."

After all, if you can't maneuver your own body, it's a good indicator that you need to drop a few pounds or increase your strength. For those with joint pain, Hinds has found that clients who perform more body-weight movements experience fewer injuries.

But don't think that using body-weight-only exercises means you're in for an easy workout — or ho-hum results. This body-challenging routine from Hinds is designed to boost metabolism, build muscle, refine your balance *and* improve your mood — all in one go.

## Timing Is Everything

This routine consists of two circuits that will take a total of about 20 minutes. For each circuit, perform one exercise after another, resting as little as possible. If you need to build in short rest periods at first, that's OK. As you improve, trim seconds off until you can do every exercise back to back.

The first circuit focuses on strength: Complete all four exercises, then rest for one minute. Repeat the entire circuit a total of three times.

After you've completed all of the sets in the strength phase, rest five minutes and move to the core circuit. Alternate between those two exercises for five minutes. To make this pairing easier, perform each move for a shorter period of time, rest the equivalent, and continue until five minutes are up.

The only "equipment" you need are stairs, a pole (like you'd find on a swing set), and a bench or a ledge that's knee-high, making your local playground the perfect venue.

## Warm-Up

Hinds suggests doing 10 minutes of dynamic exercises such as moderate-intensity running, lunges, side shuffles and bear crawls to charge your system before this fast-paced routine. (Note: You're gonna have to embrace the looks you may get from curious bystanders; bring a workout buddy if that will help you diffuse any potential awkwardness.)

### Circuit 1: Full-Body Strength

#### 1. Alligator Pushups (10 to 20 reps)



- Begin in pushup position.
- Take a “step” with your right hand and left foot so your hands and feet are in a staggered position.
- Lower your body and perform a pushup.
- Repeat the movement, this time moving your left hand and right foot forward. Once again, perform another pushup. That’s one rep. Continue alternating your hands and feet, making sure you keep your back flat and abs contracted throughout the exercise.



**Make it easier:** Perform alligator pushups climbing up a set of stairs instead of on the floor. Align hands on the same stair before each pushup.



**Make it harder:** Perform alligator pushups climbing down the stairs. Align hands on the same stair before each pushup.

## 2. Pole Pull-Ups (10 to 20 reps)



- Sit on the ground facing the base of a pole with your legs bent 90 degrees. Cross your ankles around the pole so the soles of your shoes are angled toward the ground. Grab the pole with your arms, forming about a 45-degree angle to your body.



- Pulling with your arms and pushing with your legs, shimmy your body up the pole a few feet, squeezing your shoulder blades together on each pull. Reverse the movement, returning to the start position.



**Make it easier:** Begin in a similar start position, but keep your feet on the ground, framing the pole between them. Grab the pole and pull your chest up to the pole; when you make contact, you should be standing up. Try not to use your legs much to help with the movement. Pause, then lower your body to the starting position.



**Make it harder:** Perform a pole pull-up without using your legs at all. Start in a semi-squat position under the pole, and grabbing the pole tightly with both hands, pull your body up, letting your legs hang freely.

**3. Bench Lunges** (also called Bulgarian Split Squats: 12 reps per leg)



- Stand 2 to 3 feet in front of a bench or ledge that's about knee-high, hands on your hips. Place the toes of your right foot on the bench or ledge.



- Slowly lower your body as far as you can while maintaining the natural arch in your back. Aim for your left leg bending to about 90 degrees. Pause, then push down through your heel to return to the starting position as quickly as you can. Do all 12 reps, switch legs and repeat.



**Make it easier:** Perform a bench lunge, but don't bend your front leg as far.



**Make it harder:** Perform a bench lunge, but on the way back up, explosively jump off the foot that's on the ground. Land softly and repeat.

#### 4. Modified Glute-Ham Raises (12 reps)



- Kneel with your knees bent 90 degrees and your feet behind your body. Your torso should form a straight line from your knees to your shoulders



- Cross your arms in front of your chest and bend from the waist, lowering your body as far as you can while maintaining the natural arch of your back. The goal is to lower your body in control until your nose touches the ground. (Imagine that you are bowing from a kneeling position.)
- Without using your hands, raise your body back to the starting position. As you become stronger, try to make your face touch the ground farther away from your knees.



**Make it easier:** Perform the glute-ham raise with your hands in front of you so you can use them to help push your body up from the down position.



**Make it harder:** Perform the glute-ham raise with your hands behind your head.

### **Circuit 2: Core-Power Pair**

#### **1. Plank Walkout** (repeat for 30 seconds)



- Start in the pushup position. Your body should form a straight line from your ankles to your shoulders.



- Contract your abdominal muscles as if someone is about to punch you in the stomach, squeeze your glutes together, and walk your hands out as far as you can without allowing your hips to sag.
- Hold for a second, and then walk your hands back to the starting position. Repeat until it's time to switch exercises.

## 2. Side Planks (hold each side for 30 seconds)



- Lie on your right side with your knees and legs straight. Prop your upper body up on your right elbow and forearm.



- Brace your core by contracting your abs forcefully as if someone is about to punch you in the stomach. Raise your hips until your body forms a straight line from your ankles to your shoulder and hold the position.
- Repeat on your left side.