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FITNESS

The Three Lifts That Matter Most After 40

By Scott Tischler · July 28, 2026 · 8 min read

I have competed my whole life — national vertical-leap champion out of a field north of 250,000, national karate heavyweight champion in 1997, and later a natural bodybuilder chasing Body-for-Life and NGA physique titles. I am past 40 now and still training hard. So when I tell you that most people over 40 are doing too many exercises and too little of what matters, I am not theorizing. I have lived on both sides of that line.

Here is the truth that took me years to fully respect: **after 40, training is no longer about doing more. It is about doing the few things that matter, doing them well, and being able to keep doing them for decades.** That is the whole game.

Why fewer lifts wins after 40

In your twenties, you can throw volume at a wall and grow. Recovery is cheap. Your joints forgive sloppy technique. Your hormones do a lot of the work for you.

That changes. After 40, recovery gets more expensive, tendons and connective tissue adapt slower than muscle, and the cost of an injury goes up because it takes longer to heal and steals weeks of training. The answer is not to train timidly. The answer is to concentrate your effort.

The highest return on investment in fitness after 40 is a small number of foundational compound movements, trained with intent, progressed patiently, and recovered from fully.

Compound lifts hit the most muscle, drive the most strength, and give you the most function per minute spent. Everything else is a supporting actor.

The three lifts that matter most

If I could keep only a handful of movements for the rest of my life, these are the patterns I would build everything around. Note that I am talking about **movement patterns**, not specific bar variations. The pattern is sacred; the exact tool is negotiable.

Lift / Pattern	What it trains	Why it matters after 40
The hinge (deadlift pattern)	Posterior chain — glutes, hamstrings, spinal erectors, grip	Builds the strength that protects your back and keeps you powerful and upright as you age
The squat pattern	Quads, glutes, core, whole-body coordination	Preserves lower-body strength and the ability to get up and down off the floor for life
The press (upper push)	Chest, shoulders, triceps	Maintains upper-body strength and shoulder health you use every day

And one non-negotiable partner:

- **The pull (upper pull — rows and chin-ups).** I count press-and-pull as two halves of one upper-body whole. Pulling balances all the pressing, keeps your shoulders healthy, and builds the back that holds your posture together. Skip it and you will eventually pay in cranky shoulders.

So in practice you are running four patterns: **hinge, squat, press, pull**. Three "big rocks" and their essential counterweight.

The hinge (deadlift pattern)

The deadlift is the most honest lift there is — you either pick the weight up with a braced spine or you do not. After 40 I favor variations that let you keep a strong position: **trap-bar deadlifts, Romanian deadlifts, and rack pulls** are all easier on the lower back than a maximal conventional pull from the floor, and they still deliver the goods.

Cue it simply: push your hips back, keep the bar close, brace your midsection like someone is about to punch you, and drive the floor away. The hinge is where I am most conservative with load and most strict with form.

The squat pattern

You do not have to back-squat heavy to get most of the benefit. **Goblet squats, front squats, and safety-bar squats** are joint-friendly and let you train the pattern hard without wrecking your shoulders or lower back. Squat to a depth you can control with a neutral spine — a controlled parallel beats an ugly rock-bottom rep every time.

The press and the pull

For pressing, rotate between **flat and incline bench, dumbbell presses, and overhead pressing** based on what your shoulders tolerate that season. Dumbbells and a neutral grip are a gift to aging shoulders because they let the joint move naturally.

For pulling, **chin-ups, dumbbell rows, and cable rows** cover it. Aim to do at least as much pulling volume as pressing. Your shoulders will thank you for the rest of your life.

How to program them safely

You do not need six days a week. **For most busy people over 40, two to four focused strength sessions a week is the sweet spot** — enough stimulus to build, enough recovery to adapt.

A simple, durable template:

- **Two full-body days:** Hinge + press + pull on day one; squat + press + pull on day two.
- **Three days:** Rotate the patterns so each gets trained roughly twice across two weeks, with a day of rest between hard sessions.
- **Warm up like an adult.** Five to ten minutes of easy movement and a few progressively heavier ramp-up sets. This is not optional after 40 — it is where you buy your longevity.

Keep the working sets in a **repeatable, controlled rep range** — think roughly 5 to 12 reps for most of your work sets. Leave one to three reps in the tank on most sets. **Training to failure is a tool, not a lifestyle**, and after 40 it costs more than it pays if you live there.

How to progress without breaking down

Progress after 40 is real but it is patient. The trap is chasing the numbers you hit at 30. Don't. **Progress the stimulus, not your ego.**

Use whichever of these levers your body is asking for:

- **Add a little weight** when a lift feels strong and clean.
- **Add a rep** before you add load.
- **Add a set** when you have recovery to spare.
- **Improve the quality** — slower eccentrics, better depth, cleaner bracing — which is progress even when the number on the bar stays flat.

Think in terms of small, consistent gains over months and years, not week to week. **The lifter who adds a little bit for ten years beats the one who adds a lot for ten weeks and then gets hurt.** I have watched that movie many times.

Recovery and joint protection are the real training

Here is what the competitive years taught me that I wish I had learned sooner: **the workout is the stress; the adaptation happens in recovery.** After 40, recovery is not the thing you do between training — it *is* the training.

Protect the machine:

- **Sleep is your best legal performance enhancer.** Aim for the classic seven-plus hours. Nothing you buy replaces it.
- **Eat enough protein.** A common practitioner target is roughly 0.7 to 1 gram per pound of bodyweight per day to support muscle as you age. Spread it across the day.
- **Manage the joints.** Warm up thoroughly, control your eccentrics, avoid grinding max singles every week, and rotate lift variations to give cranky joints a break without losing the pattern.
- **Respect pain versus discomfort.** Training discomfort is normal. Sharp, joint-specific, or lingering pain is a signal — back off, swap the variation, and address it early.
- **Deload on purpose.** Every four to eight weeks, take a lighter week. It is not lost time; it is how you keep training.

The bottom line

You do not need a complicated program after 40. You need the **hinge, squat, press, and pull**, trained two to four times a week, progressed patiently, and recovered from fully. Do that with intent for years and you will be stronger, more muscular, and more durable than most people half your age.

I am living proof that you do not have to slow down at 40 — you just have to get smarter about where you spend your effort. Concentrate it. Protect it. Keep showing up.

One honest caveat from someone who has trained through injuries: **this is general guidance, not a prescription for your body.** If you have a medical condition, a history of injury, or you are new to lifting, get cleared and coached by a qualified professional before you load a bar. The goal is to train for the next thirty years, not to win the next thirty days.

Key takeaways

- ② After 40, the highest-ROI training is a few foundational compound patterns done well, not a long list of exercises.
- ② Build everything around four patterns: the hinge (deadlift), the squat, the press, and the pull.
- ② Two to four focused strength sessions a week is the sweet spot for most busy people over 40.

- ② Progress patiently — add a rep before weight, prize movement quality, and leave reps in the tank.
- ② Recovery is the training: prioritize sleep, adequate protein, thorough warm-ups, and planned deloads.
- ② Respect the difference between discomfort and joint pain, and rotate variations to protect aging joints.

Frequently asked questions

What are the three most important lifts after 40?

The three foundational patterns are the hinge (a deadlift-style movement), the squat, and the press, with the pull (rows and chin-ups) as an essential fourth partner. These compound movements train the most muscle, build the most usable strength, and give the highest return per minute spent. Master these patterns before adding anything else.

How many days a week should someone over 40 lift?

For most busy people over 40, two to four focused strength sessions a week is the sweet spot. That is enough stimulus to build strength and muscle while leaving enough recovery to actually adapt. Consistency across months matters far more than squeezing in extra days.

Is it safe to deadlift after 40?

Yes, for most healthy adults the hinge pattern is one of the most valuable lifts you can train, because it builds the posterior chain that protects your back. After 40, favor back-friendly variations like trap-bar deadlifts, Romanian deadlifts, or rack pulls, and prioritize a braced, neutral spine over maximal weight. If you have back issues, get coached before loading heavy.

How much protein do I need to build muscle after 40?

A common practitioner target is roughly 0.7 to 1 gram of protein per pound of bodyweight per day to support muscle as you age. Spreading that intake across meals helps. Adequate protein plus progressive strength training is the core of holding onto and building muscle in your forties and beyond.

Do I have to train to failure to make progress?

No. Training to failure is a tool, not a lifestyle, and after 40 living there usually costs more in recovery than it pays in results. Leaving one to three reps in the tank on most sets lets you train hard, recover well, and progress consistently over the long run.

How do I progress if I can't keep adding weight every week?

Progress the stimulus, not your ego. Add a rep before you add load, add a set when you have recovery to spare, or improve rep quality with slower eccentrics and better depth. Small, consistent gains across months and years beat aggressive short-term jumps that get you hurt.

How do I protect my joints while still training hard?

Warm up thoroughly, control your eccentrics, avoid grinding maximal singles every week, and rotate lift variations so cranky joints get a break without losing the movement pattern. Treat sharp or lingering joint pain as a signal to back off and address it early, not to push through.

Can you build muscle and strength for the first time after 40?

Absolutely. Beginners over 40 can gain meaningful strength and muscle by training the core patterns two to four times a week and eating enough protein. Progress is slower and recovery matters more than it did at 20, but the trajectory is very real. Start light, get coaching if you are new, and build patiently.

About the author. Scott Tischler is the Founder & Chairman of Alrecommend.ai and a practitioner-authority on AI search and Answer Engine Optimization. With 20+ years in marketing technology — including American Express, MetLife, and UBS — and executive study at Wharton, Harvard, Yale, and Oxford, he helps businesses become the ones AI recommends.