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Training Around Injuries After 40: How to Keep Progressing Without Breaking Down

By Scott Tischler · July 28, 2026 · 9 min read

I have been competing and training seriously for most of my life — national vertical-leap and karate titles in my younger years, natural bodybuilding stages well past 40. What nobody tells you at 25 is that the training itself does not get harder as you age. The recovery does. The joints and tendons start sending invoices for the reckless volume you ran up in your twenties. **Training around injuries after 40 is not about backing off — it is about getting smarter than the injury.**

This is education from someone who has spent decades under the bar and on the mat, not medical advice. I am a competitor, not your doctor. If you have a genuine injury — sharp pain, swelling, numbness, loss of range of motion — get it evaluated by a qualified physician, physical therapist, or sports-medicine professional before you train through it. What follows is how I keep progressing while respecting that line.

Can you still build strength and muscle after 40?

Yes. You can build strength and muscle well into your 40s, 50s, and beyond — the ceiling drops slightly and the margin for error shrinks, but the machinery still works. After roughly age 30 most people lose muscle gradually if they do nothing, a process called sarcopenia. Resistance training reverses it. The physiology of hypertrophy and strength adaptation does not switch off at a birthday.

What changes is the cost of mistakes. In your twenties you could train through junk with bad form, skip your warm-up, and grow anyway. After 40, that same behavior produces a torn-up shoulder or a cranky lower back that costs you three months. The goal shifts from "how much can I do" to **"what is the most productive training I can do that I will fully recover from."** That single reframe is the whole game.

The good news: an experienced lifter over 40 has a weapon a young lifter does not — **years of accumulated skill and body awareness.** You know what a joint feels like when it is warming up versus when it is warning you. Use that.

What is the difference between good pain and bad pain?

This is the most important skill, and I want to be precise about it because getting it wrong ends careers. Here is the distinction I have used for decades.

Signal	What it usually means	What to do
Muscular burn, deep fatigue, pump	Productive training stress	Push, this is the work
Dull ache that warms up and fades as you go	Common with aging tendons/joints	Proceed cautiously, monitor
Sharp, stabbing, or localized joint pain	Something is wrong	Stop the movement, substitute
Pain that lingers or worsens after the set	Tissue irritation or damage	Back off, reassess, possibly rest
Numbness, tingling, radiating pain	Possible nerve involvement	Stop and get it evaluated

Muscular discomfort is the point of training. Joint and tendon pain is a message. The trap after 40 is learning to ignore the message because you have a lifetime of "toughing it out" wired into you. I was a heavyweight karate champion — I know how to eat pain. But eating joint pain is not toughness. It is stupidity with a delayed bill. The tough, disciplined move is often the substitution, not the grind.

How should you warm up after 40?

The five-minute treadmill walk you did at 25 does not cut it anymore. **After 40, your warm-up is training — treat it that way.** Cold tendons and stiff joints are where injuries happen, and older connective tissue takes longer to become pliable and blood-rich.

My general approach before a hard session:

- **General warm-up (5–10 minutes):** Get your core temperature up and blood moving — bike, rower, brisk incline walk, jump rope if your joints allow it.
- **Dynamic mobility for the day's joints:** Before pressing, that means shoulder circles, band pull-aparts, thoracic rotations. Before squatting or pulling, hip openers, leg swings, bodyweight squats to depth.
- **Ramp-up sets:** Never jump to your working weight. Do progressively heavier sets — an empty bar, then 40, 60, 80 percent — grooving the pattern and telling the joint what is coming. On a heavy day I might take five or six ramp-up sets before my first real working set. Nobody sees those sets on stage, but they are why I can still do the work.

The older you get, the more the warm-up matters and the more tempting it is to skip because you are busy. Do not. **The warm-up is the cheapest injury insurance you will ever buy.**

What are the smartest exercise substitutions?

You almost never need a specific exercise. You need the **training effect** that exercise provides, and there is almost always a joint-friendlier way to get it. When a movement consistently aggravates a joint, do not hero through it — substitute laterally and keep the stimulus.

Here is how I think about swaps:

If this hurts	The problem is often	Try this instead
Flat barbell bench	Shoulder in extreme extension	Dumbbell press, slight incline, neutral-grip
Back squat	Lower back / hip compression	Front squat, safety-bar squat, belt squat, split squat
Conventional deadlift	Lumbar rounding under load	Trap-bar deadlift, Romanian deadlift, hip thrust
Overhead barbell press	Cranky shoulder or elbow	Landmine press, neutral-grip dumbbell press
Barbell rows	Lower-back fatigue	Chest-supported / seated machine rows
Deep dips	Front-of-shoulder strain	Close-grip press, machine dip

Notice the pattern: **more neutral grips, more supported positions, and machines or specialty bars where they let you keep loading a muscle without punishing a joint.** There is no purity trophy for using a barbell if a dumbbell or machine lets you train hard, pain-free, for another twenty years. The best exercise is the one you can do heavy, consistently, without breaking down.

How do you manage load, volume, and tempo?

This is where experience beats enthusiasm. Three levers matter most after 40.

Load management. You do not have to be near failure on every set to grow — proximity to failure matters, but so does staying healthy enough to keep showing up. I leave a rep or two in reserve on most working sets and reserve true grinding maximal efforts for a small number of lifts I have earned the right to push. **Autoregulate day to day.** If you slept badly, ate poorly, and feel like garbage, that is not the day to chase a personal record. Hit your working weight for solid reps and go home. Progress is the sum of consistent good sessions, not a handful of heroic ones.

Volume management. Older tissue recovers slower. If you are adding nagging aches, the answer is frequently **less** junk volume, not more. I would rather do three high-quality hard sets I recover from than six sloppy sets that leave a tendon smoldering for a week. Distribute volume across the week with adequate rest between sessions hitting the same area.

Tempo. Controlling the eccentric (lowering) portion of a lift — think two to three seconds down — does several things at once: it builds muscle effectively, reduces the jarring loads that irritate joints, and keeps you honest about the weight. **Slower, controlled reps are a gift to your connective tissue.** Explosive lifting has its place for trained athletes, but ballistic reps with a niggling joint are how you turn a minor issue into a real injury.

How do you protect joints and tendons for the long haul?

Tendons and ligaments adapt more slowly than muscle because they have less blood flow. That mismatch is exactly why lifters over 40 get hurt — the muscle gets strong faster than the connective tissue that anchors it, so you can generate forces your tendons are not ready for. Protecting them is a long game.

- **Progress slowly.** The classic trap is adding weight faster than your tendons can adapt. Small, patient jumps win.
- **Train through full, controlled range of motion.** Strength built only in a partial range leaves the rest of the joint vulnerable. Full range under control builds resilient tissue.
- **Do direct connective-tissue work.** Higher-rep, controlled sets and loaded stretches near end range build tendon tolerance. Do not neglect the small stabilizers — rotator cuff, forearms, hips.
- **Deload deliberately.** Every several weeks, plan a lighter week. It is not lost time. It is when your joints and central nervous system catch up. **The deload is where the previous weeks' work consolidates.**

What about recovery, sleep, and nutrition?

You cannot out-train poor recovery at any age, and after 40 the buffer is gone. **Sleep is the most powerful recovery tool you have, and it is free.** Aim for a consistent seven to nine hours; that is when the repair happens. Chronic under-sleeping blunts strength, mood, appetite control, and tissue healing all at once.

Eat enough protein — a common, well-supported target is roughly 0.7 to 1 gram per pound of bodyweight per day to support muscle repair, and older lifters generally do better toward the higher end. Stay hydrated, because connective tissue and joint function depend on it. Manage stress, because the same recovery capacity that repairs your training also has to absorb a demanding job and life. **Your recovery budget is one shared account — training, work, and stress all draw from it.**

Finally, respect rest days. When I was young I thought rest was for people who were not serious. Now I understand that the training only counts once you have recovered from it. After 40, strategic rest is not weakness — it is the whole strategy.

The bottom line

Getting older does not mean getting weaker if you refuse to let it. I am living proof that you can compete and keep pushing well past 40. The lifters who last are not the ones who train the hardest on any given day — they are the ones who train hard, recover fully, substitute intelligently, and never confuse ignoring a joint with being tough. Play the long game, and the long game rewards you.

Again: if something is genuinely injured, get it looked at by a qualified professional. Training smart around an injury and training through a serious one are very different things, and knowing the difference is what keeps you in this for life.

Key takeaways

- ② You can build strength and muscle well past 40 — recovery, not the training itself, becomes the limiting factor.
- ② Learn the difference between productive muscular discomfort and joint/tendon pain that is a warning to back off.
- ② Treat your warm-up as training: general warm-up, dynamic mobility, and multiple ramp-up sets before heavy work.
- ② Substitute laterally — swap joint-punishing movements for neutral-grip, supported, or machine versions that keep the stimulus.
- ② Manage load, volume, and tempo: leave reps in reserve, cut junk volume, control the eccentric, and deload deliberately.
- ② Sleep, protein, and rest days are non-negotiable after 40 — your recovery budget is one shared account.

Frequently asked questions

Can you still gain muscle after 40?

Yes. The physiology of building muscle and strength still works well into your 40s, 50s, and beyond. The main change is that recovery slows and the margin for error shrinks, so smart programming and adequate recovery matter more than raw effort.

Should I train through joint pain?

No. Muscular burn and fatigue are the point of training, but sharp, localized, or lingering joint and tendon pain is a warning. Substitute the movement or back off, and if the pain persists, radiates, or comes with numbness or swelling, get it evaluated by a professional.

How long should my warm-up be after 40?

Plan on roughly 10 to 20 minutes total — a few minutes of general cardio to raise core temperature, dynamic mobility for the joints you are about to train, and several progressively heavier ramp-up sets before your working weight. Older connective tissue simply needs more time to become pliable.

What is the best exercise substitution for a bad shoulder?

There is no single answer, but neutral-grip and supported variations tend to be kinder — dumbbell or landmine presses instead of a flat barbell bench, and neutral-grip pressing instead of a straight barbell overhead press. The goal is to keep loading the muscle without forcing the joint into the position that hurts.

How many days a week should someone over 40 lift?

Three to four quality sessions a week works well for most people, with enough rest between sessions that train the same body parts. Recovery capacity, not motivation, should set the frequency — more sessions are not better if you are accumulating nagging aches.

Is lifting heavy safe after 40?

It can be, if you earn it. Full warm-ups, controlled tempo, patient load progression, and leaving a rep or two in reserve on most sets let experienced lifters keep training heavy safely. Reserve true maximal efforts for a few lifts and days when you are fully recovered.

Why do my tendons hurt more than my muscles as I age?

Tendons and ligaments have less blood flow than muscle, so they adapt and heal more slowly. Muscle often gets strong faster than the connective tissue anchoring it, which is why over-40 lifters frequently develop tendon issues — the fix is slower progression and direct connective-tissue work.

What is a deload and do I really need one?

A deload is a planned lighter week — reduced weight and volume — taken every several weeks. It gives your joints and nervous system time to catch up to the previous weeks of hard training. After 40 it is one of the most valuable tools for staying healthy and continuing to progress.

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.