



Want to Climb Better Instantly? Then Learn How to Warm Up Properly

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A few cursory arm swings—nothing to get the heart and lungs working. A few easy boulder problems, rushed through. Then it's straight onto the hard stuff.

Most climbers are lousy at warming up. Yet not only will your warm-up help safeguard you from injury, it's the single biggest factor in determining how well you climb on any given day. Less capable climbers often out-perform their peers simply because they got their warm-ups right that day. Oh, that scared you, didn't it?

The incentives are clear, so why on earth do climbers still make excuses? The notion that warming up is uncool is deeply, incomprehensibly embedded in outdoor sports. Even with all of today's knowledge, you still don't see many skiers doing star-jumps before putting on their boards or surfers skipping on the beach before paddling out.

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Climbers need warm-ups even more than most outdoor athletes. Skiing and surfing, for example, rely on the large muscle groups, where the injury risk is relatively low compared to that of hauling yourself up on your finger tendons. I get it (sort of) that most climbers still feel too self-conscious to be seen warming up at the crag, but it's mystifying that a culture of poor warming up still prevails at gyms. The info for correct practice has been available for three decades, yet climbers still leap straight onto the steepest walls and then gripe about their injuries.

If any of the above sounds remotely familiar, it could be time to take a new tack.

First, let's look at the basic structure of a warm-up for climbing, with maximum and minimum time frames for each stage.

THE THREE KEY WARM-UP STAGES

Stage 1

MEMBERSHIP SPOTLIGHT

The Secret to a High Performance Diet
is in Your Calendar

KATIE LAMBERT

How to Prevent Accidental Unclipping

KEVIN CORRIGAN

The Buddy Rappel: Rap Safely With an
Injured Partner

ALEXA FLOWER

Toproping Might Not Be as Safe as
You Think It Is

CLIMBING EDITORS

Pulse Raiser: two to five minutes

It is essential to get out of breath and physically warm before you start climbing. By promoting blood flow, you will soften your muscles and tendons and lubricate the joints in preparation for the stresses of hard climbing. Easy climbing simply won't suffice here. It doesn't matter whether you jog on the spot, jump rope, skip or do burpees—just do it!

Step 2

Mobility exercises: two to five minutes

Mobility exercises will awaken your nervous system and stimulate the tendon-reflex receptors, which protect joints and tendons from harmful forces. These exercises can be combined with stretch-band work for shoulder health. If you're bouldering and want to save time, they can be performed in the rests between easy warm-up problems, but if you're doing routes and will be belaying, do them all beforehand.

Never do static stretches for your arms and upper body in your warm-up, as those will dampen the reflex receptors. Choose one or two exercises for each of the key limbs and muscle groups. For the forearms, do finger clenches; for the shoulders, arm circles; for the torso, spinal twists; and for the legs, leg swings. Perform all movements in control, with a full range of motion and muscles lightly contracted at all times.

Step 3:

Easy climbing with progressive difficulty: 30 to 45 minutes

The most important rule for climbing is, *Never jump from easy climbing straight to hard stuff*. Build up through the grades over a period of at least half an hour. The approach is slightly different whether you're training strength or endurance, but the strategy amounts to the same thing.

For endurance, build the pump up in stages, to acclimatize your body to dealing with lactic acid and stave off the dreaded "flash pump." If you're bouldering or training strength, you need to recruit the muscle fibers progressively over a sufficient time period, or you simply won't be able to pull at your hardest, and you risk injury.

5 TIPS TO LOVE WARMING UP

Stage 1

1. Take an athlete's perspective

The first step to help you motivate for a better warm-up is to view yourself as an athlete. If you consider warming up as only for the pros, it's time for a paradigm shift. It doesn't matter what grade you do. If you love climbing, look after your body. Not only will this outlook help you feel more enthusiastic about warming up, you will end up a better climber in the bargain.

2. Weigh the range of benefits

For many climbers—why, I don't know—the threat of injury is insufficient incentive for a proper warm-up. If you are one of these climbers, remind yourself that the warm-up is also a key time for improving weaknesses, technique and mental acuity. A handy tip is to work your weakest grips during warm-up climbs and see how far you can go. For example, if you're really weak at dragging (meaning open-handing as opposed to crimping holds), then try to drag on as many holds as possible.

Pick various aspects of general technique, such as accurate footwork, relaxed grip and straight arms, and try to execute them perfectly during warm-up climbs. You will then climb more efficiently when you move onto harder climbs and are less likely to make mistakes due to loss of concentration. Movement drills also make the warm-up far more enjoyable and challenging and mean you are less likely to rush and be injured. In short, you'd be

crazy not to cash in on the benefits.

3. Personalize your approach

Don't just copy a climbing superhero or do what a book tells you. Warming up is just like any other aspect of training—you'll get the best results if you personalize your routine. Do the exercises you enjoy and change them regularly. For example, if you normally do burpees as your pulse raiser, try skipping instead; or if you normally warm up your shoulders with press-ups or arm swings, do some stretch-band work. Own the process and take heart and power from the fact that your warm-up works better for you than anyone else.

4. Love the tactical game

Warming up for climbing is a skill and an art. It takes years to develop the ability to listen to your body, and be ready for those on-the-fly adjustments that can make all the difference to your performance. For example, if you're feeling that little bit stiffer and more sluggish than usual, try doing slightly more cardio and mobility work. When you start your warm-up climbs, if you notice yourself rushing and find that cumulative fatigue sets in, take your shoes off and stop for a few minutes, even if you'll lose time and momentum. For bouldering sessions, if you sense that your fingers or arms aren't "waking up" after a rest day, it may help to do some specific recruitment work, such as deadhangs for your fingers or lock-offs for your arms. For route sessions, it may benefit you to work a bit harder in the warm-up and get more of a primary pump on one day; another day, you may sense a safer strategy in taking it slightly easier.

5. Develop a warm-up instinct

The eternal question on warming up is how long to take. Experienced climbers often notice that the necessary amount of warming up varies subtly according to their fitness levels and external lifestyle factors such as stress and fatigue levels, how much they've slept lately, and recent dietary habits. Never let lack of time or energy sway your judgment. If you rush and do too little, you may well climb badly and risk injury, but if you take too long you may tire yourself and run out of time. It's always a delicate balance.

Half an hour would represent the absolute minimum from starting your routine to being ready to climb at your limit, but 45 minutes is optimum, and one hour is about max. It is always better to do slightly too much than too little, yet the flip side is that if we always take a long time to warm up, the body may adapt and demand it, especially with age. If you feel this happening then it is possible to coax your body to warm up slightly more quickly, although still within the same time parameters.

In summary, if you don't really think about what you're doing in your warm-up, you are missing out on one of the most powerful tactical procedures in climbing. Every drop of effort and enthusiasm you put in will come back to you.

Neil Gresham has been uninjured for over a decade and attributes it to his warm-up. Gresham offers personalized training plans at www.neilgresham.com.

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