



BY CHARIS TORRANCE

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO CALISTHENICS

Have you seen those videos of athletes holding themselves up from a pole like a human flag? That's calisthenics.

You're probably asking yourself why on earth we'd ask you to do that, but hear us out. 'Most people associate calisthenics with bodybuilders and athletes, but anyone can do it, no matter your fitness level,' says Stanley Geldenhuys, fitness coach, three-time South African calisthenics champion and the owner of

Calisthenics coach Stanley Geldenhuys tells us why anyone can benefit from this simple set of exercises.

MAD Calisthenics in Cape Town. Stanley was a breakdancer before he discovered calisthenics. 'I was looking for an exercise regime to keep me fit for my breakdancing when I met a group of calisthenics enthusiasts who encouraged me to get involved in the competition side of things,'

he says. 'I did my first calisthenic competition in 2015, and I haven't looked back since.' Stanley retired from competitions this year, and now he and his team train others in the discipline. We asked him to tell us about the art of mastering your own body weight.



In calisthenics you use your own body weight as resistance to build strength, flexibility and fitness.



WHAT IS CALISTHENICS?

'Derived from the Greek words "kalos" (beautiful) and "sthenos" (strength), calisthenics dates back thousands of years to ancient Greece,' Stanley says. Calisthenics were an integral part of the training regimen for warriors and athletes to improve strength, flexibility and agility.

Calisthenics has evolved over time. In the 19th century, German physical educator Friedrich Ludwig Jahn introduced gymnastic exercises called 'Turnen', which combined strength, flexibility and artistic movements, laying the foundation for modern calisthenics. During the 20th century, calisthenics gained popularity as a form of physical training for military personnel, enhancing their combat readiness and overall fitness levels. It was even incorporated into physical education programmes in schools worldwide in the 1980s.

Calisthenics has experienced a resurgence in recent years. The rise of street workout culture and the prevalence of social media platforms have contributed to its increased visibility and popularity. Calisthenics competitions and events now showcase the

impressive skills and strength of athletes in this discipline.

'Calisthenics is not just an exercise; it's a way of life centred on movement,' Stanley says.

'I describe it as a raw form of gymnastics, but it incorporates a lot of body-weight movements – your push-ups, pull-ups, squats... any type of exercise you do using only your own body weight and resistance.'

SHOULD YOU BE DOING CALISTHENICS?

'Yes!' Stanley answers. 'Anyone can benefit from calisthenics.' For beginners, calisthenics serves as an excellent entry into the world of fitness. Your basic exercises are easy to perform, and you can change them up as your fitness level increases.

The big win? Because you're using your own body weight, you don't have to worry about gym equipment. Being able to do it virtually anywhere with minimal equipment makes it an ideal exercise routine if you have limited time or access to a gym.

As with any exercise, there is a risk of injury if you aren't doing it right. 'I would recommend

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having a professional guide you, especially in the beginning,' Stanley says. 'They can assess your abilities, identify areas to focus on, and ensure proper form and technique.' This is especially true if you have any existing injuries or medical conditions. Modifications may be necessary to prevent exacerbating injuries or aggravating conditions. Pregnant women should consult their doctor before starting any new exercise routine.

BENEFITS

• Increased body strength:

Calisthenics exercises engage multiple muscle groups simultaneously, leading to improved strength and muscle tone. Exercises such as push-ups, pull-ups and squats challenge the muscles to support and move the body, resulting in increased strength and power.

• Improved joint mobility and flexibility:

Calisthenics movements often involve a full range of motion, promoting joint mobility and flexibility.



Stanley demonstrates (from the top) single-leg push-ups, hollow-body hold, V-ups, alternating legs and tuck-knee crunches.

and jumping jacks can elevate your heart rate and enhance your cardiovascular fitness.

• Improved coordination:

Calisthenics exercises require precise control of body movements, which enhances coordination and body awareness. As you perform exercises such as handstands, muscle-ups and pistol squats, you develop better balance, proprioception and spatial awareness.

GETTING STARTED

Again, Stanley emphasises the importance of finding a personal trainer who can provide guidance and support from the beginning. 'While online resources like YouTube can offer some guidance, having a qualified professional present ensures correct technique and form, which is essential for improvement and injury prevention.'

Stanley suggests focusing on mastering fundamental exercises such as push-ups, pull-ups, dips, squats, lunges and planks. 'Prioritise proper form and technique before advancing to more complex movements,' he says. Building a strong foundation is crucial for long-term progress and injury prevention, so starting with the basics is key.

Setting realistic goals aligned with your current fitness level is another important aspect. By establishing achievable goals, such as increasing repetitions or mastering specific exercises, you can stay motivated and effectively track your progress.

Gradual progression is the key to success here. As your strength and skills improve, gradually increase the intensity, duration or complexity of your workouts.

Progression can be achieved through exercise variations, increasing repetitions or reducing rest time between sets.

Listening to your body is crucial. Pay attention to how your body feels during and after workouts. While it's normal to experience muscle soreness, be mindful of any pain or discomfort that could indicate an injury. Rest when needed, prioritise recovery, and avoid pushing yourself too hard too quickly. ❖

MASTER THE BASICS

Stanley says these four moves form the foundation of a calisthenics routine:

1 PUSH-UPS primarily target the chest, shoulders and triceps while engaging the core muscles for stability. To do a push-up properly, start in a plank position with your hands slightly wider than shoulder-width apart. Lower your body by bending your elbows, keeping them close to your sides, until your chest nearly touches the ground. Push back up, fully extending your arms.

2 PULL-UPS are great for developing upper-body strength, particularly targeting the back, biceps and forearms. Find a bar or sturdy overhead structure and grip it with your palms facing away from you. Hang with your arms fully extended, then pull your body upwards by engaging your back and arms until your chin clears the bar. Lower yourself back down in a controlled manner.

3 DIPS target the shoulders, chest and triceps, and engage the core muscles. Find parallel bars or sturdy surfaces like dip bars or the edge of a bench. Hold yourself up with your arms fully extended, then lower your body by bending your elbows until your upper arms are parallel to the ground. Push yourself back up to the starting position.

4 SQUATS target the quadriceps, hamstrings and glutes. Start by standing with your feet shoulder-width apart and toes slightly turned out. Lower your body by bending your knees and pushing your hips back, maintaining a straight back and keeping your chest lifted. Descend until your thighs are parallel to the ground, then push through your heels to return to a standing position.

Exercises like lunges, deep squats and dynamic stretches enhance the flexibility of major muscle groups, leading to improved posture, mobility and overall movement quality.

• **Enhanced cardiovascular endurance:** Many calisthenics exercises involve continuous movement and can be performed in high-intensity intervals, improving cardiovascular endurance. Engaging in fast-paced circuits or doing exercises like burpees

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