[IMAGE]

Choosing a Workout That's Right for You

Ask Yourself These Questions First

By Dr. David Ryan

Everyone wants to get in better shape, lose weight, tone and tighten, etc., but that doesn't mean they know where to start. It is important that anyone beginning an exercise program completely understand a few basic principles first. In fact, beginners and experienced exercisers alike can benefit from this information; if you're just starting out, it will help you choose the most appropriate, effective workout for you, and if you're more seasoned, it will allow you to better help other people with their exercise programs. After all, if you go to a gym, or even if people know you exercise, you are likely to get asked questions by someone with less experience.

Here are some of the key questions to ask yourself before beginning a workout. Answering these questions will give you some general guidelines on how to get started and types of exercises to do (or avoid) based on your age and fitness level. They will also help you determine, among other things, how many sets and repetitions to perform for different exercises (repetition = doing a particular activity once, such as one abdominal crunch or one pushup; set = a particular number of repetitions to be performed consecutively before resting).

Workout - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark **The Key Questions**

How long have you been training?
What is your basic fitness level?
What is your age?
What is your body type?
What are your goals?
Are you training for a particular sport?

How Long Have You Been Training?

This seems like a straightforward question, but consider the following before answering: if you have not been participating in an active exercise program for at least 45 minutes a day for at least three days per week (for more than just the past few days or weeks), then you must consider that you have not been training at all.

When beginning any exercise program, it is important to possess at least some aerobic/breathing capacity. That means that before you begin training, you should begin walking or doing some activity that is repetitive and raises your heart rate for a minimum of 5 minutes every day. You can think of that as one set for however many reps it takes to reach 5 minutes. In most healthy individuals, you should be able to add 5 minutes every three days, and continue on until you have established a daily exercise program of 30 minutes per day for two weeks.

It is important not to become too eager and jump into a full-fledged exercise program too quickly. Many times, individuals become very distressed because their training causes them to become too sore to participate. You don't want to overdo it, especially if you're a beginner, but even if you have some experience and are either "stepping up" to the next level or restarting exercise after a period of inactivity.

Exercise is beneficial because it allows the body to adapt to physical stress. If you over-exercise, your risk of suffering an injury increases exponentially. This happens more commonly than many people realize. Some soreness may be manageable, but excessive soreness is unnecessary and will limit your ability to train. Microscopic tears may form in your tendons and ligaments , causing damage that may later lead to a more significant injury.

The body requires time to rest and recover. Submaximal effort is necessary for the beginner to recover from the physical stresses exerted on their bodies. So, for the first three to four weeks of exercise, it is important that you leave the gym with the attitude, *That was nothing, I could have done more.* Too many people begin an exercise program and expect overnight results, but only produce overnight injury.

What Is Your Basic Fitness Level?

Have you been participating in an exercise program at least three times a week for 45 minutes daily? If the answer is no, then you are considered a beginner. If you train anywhere from four to six days a week for approximately 45 minutes a day, then you are considered a novice exercise enthusiast. If you are participating in exercise greater than four to six days a week for longer than 45 minutes a day, or you are

participating in a competitive sport, then you are considered an advanced exercise enthusiast.

(By the way, if you are training 4 to 6 days a week longer than 2-3 hours a day, you are likely suffering from an obsessive-compulsive disorder. That may seem rather harsh, but it is likely very true. Also keep in mind that the human body does not respond favorably to exercise that is longer than 60 minutes on a daily basis. It will elevate your cortisol levels and likely cause more harm than benefit.)

If you are interested in getting your child started on a regular exercise program, it may be time; consider that approximately one-third of all children in the United States are considered overweight. Most children who are simply overweight can participate in any exercise program; however, children who are obese should consider nutritional guidance prior to beginning an exercise program. Most trainers can offer general suggestions for eating habits, but they cannot indicate a specific diet for someone to follow. Only a physician and a registered dietitian are licensed to be able to carry out this duty legally. It is important to understand that diet has more influence on your body's appearance than exercise. For example, one-half of an average bagel is approximately 200 calories; most individuals would have to run a mile at an intense rate to burn just 200 calories.

Workout - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark **What Is Your Age?**

The extremely young athlete can recover from a significant amount of exercise in most cases; someone who is elderly will likely enter into the exercise program with a completely different set of needs to achieve their fitness level. For example, if you are over the age of 40, 50, you will likely need to spend time building up cardiovascular fitness. And flexibility is lost at an alarming rate when you pass the age of 35. If you are over the age of 60 or 70, balance, flexibility, coordination, and cardiovascular fitness become obstacles that must be overcome prior to beginning a weight-resistance program.

For anyone suffering from arthritis, it is better to focus on higher repetitions and less weight. Advance your exercise program by reducing the rest time needed between sets instead of trying to use more weight. Learn to flex your muscles while you train, or exercise on a vibrating surface. Both of these techniques will result in more muscle stimulation with less pressure on your joints.

For most people, it is best to start with one set. The repetitions should be high on any exercise. That means somewhere between 20 to 30 repetitions per exercise for approximately the first two weeks. This is necessary to build muscular coordination and allow specific chemical reactions to occur in the supporting

tissues. You should always choose a weight that provides resistance, but allows for all of the repetitions to be completed. Make sure that you can do one set of every exercise for every body part for 20 to 30 repetitions for at least two weeks before advancing to the next level.

Most individuals who are over 40 years of age require a stress test to determine their cardiac fitness level. If you have any type of physical condition that requires an ongoing medication, it is important to speak to both your doctor and pharmacist prior to beginning an exercise program.

What Is Your Body Type?

Our bodies come in three basic shapes, skinny, muscular and plump. They actually have three scientific names: *ectomorph*, *mesomorph* and *endomorph*, respectively. Most individuals who are muscular will benefit from performing six to eight repetitions of resistance exercises. Most individuals who are skinny will benefit by only doing six repetitions. Most individuals who are plump will benefit by performing 12 to 20 repetitions. It is important to understand that your body type is a genetic code and that specific factors influence how many repetitions you should be doing to improve your general physique.

What Are Your Goals?

When setting a fitness goal, it is best to consider achievable changes that you would like to see over a 30-day time frame. Gaining or losing 2 pounds per month is considered a safe level. Individuals who are just beginning or are untrained are likely to notice a much more drastic change in the first 60 to 90 days. As time goes on, the percentage of change will be much more difficult to attain and the 2-pound-per-month rule will take on much more realistic meaning.

Consider that if you want to lose 20 pounds, it is likely to take you approximately 10 months to achieve that goal. If you are trying to gain 10 pounds, you will not likely gain that weight as lean body mass in less than 5 months, and that will eventually begin to taper off. No matter what your goals, keep them realistic and realize that it is safer in the long run to achieve them slowly.

Are You Training for a Specific Sport or Activity?

Workout - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark The question of what type of workout to do is particularly important if you are training for a specific sport or athletic activity. For example, if you play tennis, consider the average time spent for each point - anywhere from 1 second (for an ace) to 40 seconds

(for a long rally). If you are a high-school wrestler, consider that each period lasts approximately 2 minutes, whereas if you are a college wrestler, they will last approximately 3 minutes each. If you play football, the average length of any play is approximately 6 to 16 seconds. You should do exercises that train your muscles and body to perform well under these specific circumstances.

Depending on the speed of the exercise that you are performing, the number of repetitions of any given exercise that you should be doing should directly relate to the amount of time required by your particular sport. Football players will often train with 6 to 10 repetitions, depending on the time of the season and their particular position on the field. This will help develop strength and power for short exercise bursts - the equivalent of an average play. A tennis player will usually play between 10 and 20 seconds before a short pause between points. This means that their training exercises should last between 20 to 30 reps. A wrestler may participate in an exercise that will require 25-100 repetitions, since they are competing for several minutes at a time with no break; this is why calisthenics are often the exercise of choice for the in-season grappler. Advanced training techniques will include a series of exercises that are performed at different speeds and offer some dynamic, explosive movements, while others will produce a more static and stable format. It all depends on what you're trying to accomplish.

For most people who have been training for a while and are considered a novelist or advanced lifter, the common format of 8 to 12 repetitions is standard. Depending on your body type, age, health conditions, and other factors we have discussed, variations of that standard can be incorporated into your workout routine.

Day One Starts Today

Once you've answered these six important questions, you can develop the workout that's right for you. Remember that fitness level, age, weight and goals are all important considerations, not only in terms of the types of exercises you choose to do (aerobic vs. anaerobic; short burst vs. endurance, high rep vs. low rep, weight-resistance vs. body-weight only, etc.), but also how many repetitions and sets you choose to perform for different exercises. Talk to your doctor before beginning any new fitness program, particularly if you have a medical condition that may limit the types of exercises you are able to perform, and consult with a qualified fitness trainer to help determine the best workout to achieve your fitness and health goals.

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