

[IMAGE]

Avoiding the Top Ten Fitness Mistakes

By Meghan Vivo

Not getting the outcome you wanted from your workout? A commitment to physical fitness isn't enough. To get results, you've also got to do it right. Starting with the goals you set and the exercises you choose, here are 10 fitness mistakes to avoid.

When Jan. 1 came and went, were you one of the millions of Americans who vowed to eat healthier and exercise more? Whether your goal is to lose a few pounds, change a clothing size, gain muscle mass or improve overall health, exercise is a critical component of your plan. Once you know the steps to achieving your fitness goals, it's just as important to know what not to do. Watch out for these common fitness mistakes that are sure to spoil your efforts.

1. Rushing Your Reps

You want to get through the weight-lifting portion of your workout as quickly as possible, so you hustle through 15 reps and check that exercise off the list. Bad idea. Rushing through your repetitions too quickly raises blood pressure, increases your risk for joint injury and compromises your results. Experts recommend exhaling for two counts as you lift and inhaling for four counts as you return to your starting position. Be sure to exhale during the hardest part of the lifting process.

2. Losing Focus

Research suggests you get a better workout when you're mentally focused on the particular muscle group you're working. Reading, watching TV and talking to friends can keep you motivated to get to the gym, but stop every few minutes on cardio machines to pay attention to your heart rate and push yourself with more resistance, a steeper incline or a quicker pace. When lifting weights, practice mindful exercise by thinking about the muscles you're working until you can feel the resistance in those areas.

A male and female workout couple. - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark 3. Believing You Can Eat Anything If You Exercise

It's easier than you think to gain weight even if you're exercising. One extra "treat" each day can more than make up for the calories burned in a workout. Here's the math: You need to burn 3,500 calories to lose a

pound. So if you're burning 300 calories in one workout, it will take you nearly 12 workouts to lose one pound. To put that into perspective, the average person burns around 250 calories walking for one hour at 3.5 mph. That means you have to do a lot of cardio to burn just a few hundred calories. If you cut your intake by 300 calories in addition to burning 300, it will take you half as long to lose a pound. So watch what you eat, even if you're working out regularly.

Once you're eating right, also be aware of the timing of your meals. It may sound counterintuitive, but to burn fat you need to eat. You will get more out of your workout if you eat a light, balanced meal beforehand as well as a small meal of protein and carbs within two hours after the workout to build and repair muscles and blood vessels.

4. Failing To Vary Your Routine

Muscles are incredibly efficient. If you do the same exercises at the same pace and intensity each day, certain muscles get stronger and expend less energy, and you burn fewer calories. Try shaking up your workout routine at least once a month - add an extra workout per week, increase your workout by 5-10 minutes, use interval training or add an incline for short bursts of higher intensity.

For those hooked on a certain piece of cardio equipment, try new activities that work different muscles (e.g., cycling or swimming). Cross-training can vastly improve your results. Rather than spending a full 30 minutes on the treadmill, use the treadmill for just 15 minutes and then hop on a rowing machine, stationary bike or elliptical trainer. Exercise can be fun if you vary your routine and continually search for alternatives you enjoy.

5. Thinking Cardio Is Enough

Many people, especially women, think a good cardiovascular workout is all they need to maintain a healthy weight. Unfortunately, the human body begins losing muscle at age 30, and the average woman loses five pounds of muscle every decade after that. Strength training builds muscle, which has the added benefit of increasing metabolism and burning calories. With strength training, every pound of muscle that you build burns an additional 50 calories a day even while you're sleeping. A well-rounded routine should consist of 3-4 cardio workouts and 2-3 strength-training sessions per week.

6. Using Cardio Equipment Improperly

When using the elliptical trainer, treadmill or stair climber, do you stand up straight? Or are you slumped over, trying desperately to keep up? The American Council on Exercise calls this the "gym slouch," and it

not only prevents you from getting a good workout, but also can be damaging to your spine.

Hanging on to the cardio equipment robs you of a true moderate- to high-intensity workout - think of all the extra calories you can burn from moving your arms and forcing your body to maintain balance. If you can't stand straight on the cardio machines, slightly decrease the speed or resistance level. If you must hold on, rest your fingers on the bars rather than keeping an iron grip.

7. Performing Strength-Training Exercises Improperly

You can hurt yourself if you don't adjust the seat height and weight of strength-training machines before you use them. Choose a weight you can lift for 2-3 sets of 10-15 repetitions each while maintaining correct form throughout. If you're struggling after the first few reps or you're using momentum rather than muscle to lift the weight, decrease the weight. Be sure to perform each repetition slowly and with control, and don't hold your breath. Exhale when lifting the weight and inhale when releasing the weight. And finally, remember to rest your muscles for at least 48 hours between training sessions.

To see results, isolate the muscles and focus on the specific zone you're working. For example, an effective abdominal workout requires contraction from the rib cage to the hip bone, whereas most people use their upper torso, neck and head to lift the weight. Other common mistakes include doing lat pull-downs behind your head instead of in front of your shoulders and chest, and failing to lock your elbows at your sides when toning the triceps.

A woman does chest exercises on a workout ball while being spotted by her partner. - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark

8. Consuming Sports Drinks And Energy Bars Unnecessarily

Most recreational exercisers don't need bars or drinks to give them energy. If you exercise for 60 minutes or more, depending on the intensity, you may want a sports drink. For a 30-60 minute workout, water should be sufficient. No matter how long or hard you work out, drink plenty of water - at least two cups of water before your workout, plus another 4-6 ounces every 15 minutes during your workout. By the time you feel thirsty, you're already mildly dehydrated!

9. Setting Unrealistic Expectations

If you drag yourself to the gym three times a week to walk for 30 minutes, you expect to lose weight, right? Probably not. Despite advertisements to the contrary, it's unrealistic to think you can lose 30 pounds in 30 days or that you can have washboard abs simply by doing 10 minutes of crunches a day. In reality, experts recommend 3½ to 4 hours of physical activity per week just to prevent weight gain. There are 168 hours in a

week - spending one percent of your time in the gym won't transform you into a supermodel or a marathon runner. If you want results, you've got to do the work.

It's best to build your fitness gradually and lose only 1-2 pounds per week to ensure you don't lose muscle or bone tissue in addition to fat. If you set goals appropriate to your fitness and skill level and don't compare yourself to others, you won't get discouraged and be tempted to give up after just a few workouts.

A bottle of water, an eight pound dumbbell and an apple. - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark 10.

Burning Yourself Out

Motivation is a great thing, but starting off too strong can lead to quick burnout, soreness and eventually giving up. If you're new to exercise, consider a few sessions with a personal trainer to learn proper use of machines and healthy ways to achieve your fitness goals.

You can't shrink fat in one particular area of your body, so don't burn yourself out trying. The best way to change your body composition is by eating fewer calories and burning more fat through regular aerobic exercise and strength training for all major muscle groups. If you have medical concerns or prior injuries, be sure to discuss your fitness goals and plans with your doctor.

Working out may seem like it should come naturally, but even the most experienced gym-goers have room to learn. We all make mistakes, but if you're spending the time and energy on a workout, you may as well reap the benefits.

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