

This chapter is dedicated to those taking the first step toward a healthy lifestyle.



Exercise is an excellent way to get fit, improve your health and, if needed, lose a few excess pounds. In the early stages of your program, you'll notice immediate benefits such as increased energy, improved strength and a greater sense of well-being – and your clothes may even fit better! But at some point in the future, you may also notice that your improvements have slowed and the bathroom scale is stuck. This isn't necessarily a sign that you've been slacking off. Rather, it's probably the fact that your body has gotten used to your program. You've hit the dreaded plateau.

IN A RUT, WHAT SHOULD I DO?

Think of the first time that you used a stationary bicycle, a treadmill or an elliptical machine. Afterward, your body might have ached and it may have been a bit tough to get through your next workout. But after a few more workouts, it wasn't as bad as you once thought. This is because the body is designed for efficiency. It adapts to stressful situations and becomes more fit in order to handle the demands that are placed on it. If the demands don't change, however, your body no longer has the need to adapt and your level of fitness remains the same.

When this occurs, it's truly a critical time for beginners. At this point, one of two

things can happen: They'll either (1) quit their program or (2) take steps to maintain a routine and continue their lifestyle change.

What follows are several suggestions as to how you can revamp a stale exercise regimen and continue to work toward your goals. Remember, you don't have to use all of these recommendations. But you should consider incorporating at least one of them in your workout every 4-6 weeks (or whenever your body seems to require change).

GET FITT!

In general, a workout has four variables that can be organized under the acronym FITT: frequency, intensity, time and type. Each of these variables can be modified in order to overcome plateaus in your aerobic (or cardiorespiratory) training and strength training.

A valuable component of a well-rounded program is aerobic training. Let's look at how your aerobic training can be varied.

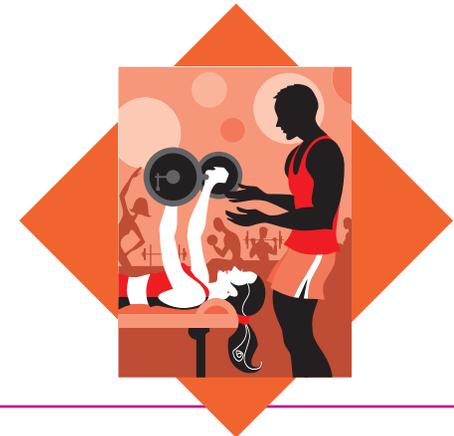
Frequency

The number of workouts that you log each week is your frequency of training. If you're doing two workouts per week and your schedule permits, you can increase the frequency to three. When weight loss is a primary goal, you'll need to add a few more

Chapter 10

Overcoming Plateaus in Training

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Exercise is an excellent way to get fit, improve your health and, if needed, lose a few excess pounds. (Photo courtesy of www.bigfoto.com.)

workouts to promote an adequate expenditure of calories. It may be difficult for some people to find the time to exercise more than a few times per week. The good news is that you don't have to perform traditional activities to increase your caloric expenditure. Implementing several tactics – such as taking the stairs instead of the elevator or walking instead of driving – can have, over time, a fairly significant impact.

It must also be understood, though, that too much exercise can be a bad thing. Often, people fall into the trap of overtraining which is a frequency (and/or volume) of training that's beyond the ability to recover. As noted earlier, the body responds to stress but too much will cause it to shut down and conserve energy. Classic signs of overtraining are aches, muscle/joint pain, insomnia, a drop in performance, fatigue, irritability and lowered immunity.

If you experience more than one of these symptoms, you should reduce the frequency (and/or volume) of your training. Initially, you may need a few days of rest to allow your body the opportunity to fully recover. Eventually, you can add some days of light activity that permit time for your muscles and energy systems to recuperate but still get you

moving. Examples of enjoyable and appropriate activities are yoga, Pilates, golf, frisbee and leisure walks. Remember, exercise can be fun, too!

Intensity

Meeting the requirements for aerobic training can be accomplished in a few ways. Most people are familiar with traditional, continuous exercise in which they need to attain roughly 60-90% of their age-predicted maximum heart rates for a designated period of time. One mistake that's often made by beginners is finding a comfortable level of effort – but never thinking to adjust it as they become more fit. Failing to increase the heart rate to a level of about 60-90% may be just the reason why a person isn't progressing. (Note: If you have any type of cardiac abnormality or condition, this level of intensity may not be appropriate. Consult with your physician first).

Another way to change an otherwise boring aerobic routine is to do interval training which is, essentially, doing intervals of brief but intense effort alternated with periods of recovery. Short bursts of an increased workload can get your body to reach higher levels of fitness. For example, you might do intervals that increase your heart rate to about 70-95% or more of your maximum interspersed with periods of light

activity in which your heart rate is about 50-60% of your maximum. Interval training is great for revving up your metabolism as it makes you work a bit harder than usual. Because of its higher intensity, interval training shouldn't be done more than twice per week.

Time

Another variable of aerobic training is the time or duration. Adding just a few extra minutes to a workout can be a great way to get past a plateau – provided that this doesn't result in overtraining. In addition, increasing the time of activity isn't always feasible for those who lead busy lives. If this is the case, refer to the discussion of intensity to make the most out of your time.

Type

If you've been going to a fitness facility for a few weeks, you probably noticed that some people seem to gravitate toward the same modality (or equipment) every time. This may be fine for a while but if you'd like more of a challenge, try something that you've avoided. If you always walk on a treadmill, for example, try out an elliptical machine.

Keep in mind that the recommended duration of aerobic training doesn't have to be completed on one modality, either. Your

workout can be comprised of two or three different modalities. If boredom is a large deterrent to your training, you'll also find that this helps. Keep in mind, too, that aerobic training doesn't always have to be done on a piece of equipment that's found in a fitness facility; try activities such as swimming, biking, hiking, racquetball, basketball and so on.

Another valuable component of a well-rounded program is strength training. If you've built your program entirely around aerobic training and find yourself at a plateau, adding a day or two of strength training may be just the remedy. The more lean-body mass you have, the more calories you expend during rest and activity. Strength training can also ensure that lean-body mass is preserved during weight loss.

The same principles of frequency, intensity, time and type also apply to strength training. Keep in mind that a program doesn't have to be changed dramatically every 4-6 weeks; instead, focus on one variable at a time.



Golf is an example of an enjoyable and appropriate activity that will allow your muscles and energy systems to recuperate but still get you moving.



Aerobic training doesn't always have to be done on a piece of equipment that's found in a fitness facility; try an activity such as biking.

Initially, you can vary your program by incorporating different machines. For example, if you've been doing a chest press, try a chest fly instead. If you've been using machines for a while, have a personal trainer or fitness professional show you a few free-weight exercises.

If you're comfortable with your current exercises, try implementing one or more of the following strategies:

- **Add another set of the same exercise.** Or if you already do multiple sets, reduce the number to one or two sets and use a greater level of effort.
- **Use different repetition ranges to impose different demands on your body.** Here are two examples: If you've been doing 12-15 repetitions, use a weight that's heavier than usual and try to do 8-10 repetitions; if you've been doing 10-12 repetitions, use a weight that's lighter than usual and try to do 15-20 repetitions.
- **Slow down the speed with which you perform each repetition.** You'll have to use a lighter weight but when doing repetitions more slowly, you'll find that it takes much more control and

concentration and makes the exercise more intense.

- **Reduce the amount of recovery time that you take between exercises/sets.** So if you're in the habit of camping out for a few minutes between sets, try a shortened rest period of 30 seconds.
- **Change the order in which you do your exercises.** By moving an exercise that you usually do at the end of your routine to the beginning, your performance will improve in that first exercise. This can help lagging muscles.

An effective method of training that you can also incorporate to get fit is circuit training. This can be done by setting up a circuit (or series) of about a dozen exercises that are performed one after the other for one set each with brief recovery periods between exercises; at the end of the circuit, you can repeat it a second time if you desire. In addition, you can perform an aerobic/strength circuit. You can do this by alternating one or more strength-training exercises with 3-5 minutes of intense aerobic activity.

MENTAL ASPECTS

Not to be forgotten is the influence that the mind has on plateaus. Here are a few mental aspects that should be considered:

Negative Thinking

Perhaps the main reason why someone doesn't initiate an exercise program is a lack of motivation. Once you begin a program, it's important for you to maintain the same motivation that drove you to take your first step to get fit. Negative thinking is a deterrent to exercise and is, unfortunately, why most people quit their exercise program.

Negative thoughts can start out small such as "I don't have enough time" or "I'll never reach my goals." Slowly, these thoughts tend to consume the mind. This makes exercisers forget how good it feels to finish their workouts or how far they've progressed. Remember, exercise should be a lifetime activity to maintain and condition your body, not a quick fix such as losing pounds that may have taken years to accumulate.

Goal Setting

You should also take time to analyze your goals. At first, the reason for initiating an exercise program may have been because you want to lose weight. But this may not be enough reason to stick with your program. Look deeper and assess what's important to you. What do you value in life? Being mobile, staying healthy and gaining strength are all results of exercise that can improve your quality of life.

Next, decide if your goals are attainable. Did you walk into a fitness facility stating that you'd lose 40 pounds quickly? This is a large amount of weight that will not be lost in a safe manner over the course of one or two months. A better strategy is to set smaller, reasonable goals that you can attain. Among other things, this will allow you to feel a sense of accomplishment. In the case of weight loss, for example, start out with a goal of 4-5 pounds in one month – which is much healthier and less stressful on the mind and body.

All or Nothing

Lastly, stay away from "all-or-nothing" thinking. This type of mindset almost never works in any life situation. Many people tend to magnify their mistakes and overlook all of the positive things that they've accomplished. You might have eaten pretty well during the past few days or managed to have a good workout three times the previous week. So if you eat dessert or miss a workout, you haven't "blown it." It



When doing repetitions more slowly, you'll find that it takes much more control and concentration and makes the exercise more intense. (Photo by Peter Silletti.)



just doesn't make sense to focus on one minor incident.

Learn from your mistakes. Accept the fact that you're human and perfection rarely exists. When these things happen, it's critical to get right back with your program. Once this is learned, it's easier for

you to cope with other incidents that might discourage your routine.

So instead of wasting time wishing for a dream body, try praising your own body. If your cardiovascular and musculoskeletal systems aren't maintained, they'll deteriorate. By challenging yourself, you can attain a healthier body and better outlook on life. And if you stay focused on positive results, you'll get fit!



If you stay focused on positive results, you'll get fit!

