Fitness FAQs for Beginners

Starting an exercise program can be intimidating enough, with the usual concerns about finding the time and the motivation to stay with your program. So don’t let uncertainty about exercise fundamentals hold you back.

Q: Why is it so important to include strength training in my regular workout routine? I thought aerobic exercise was all you really needed.
A: Strength training is the key to helping you maintain your muscle mass. Doing so allows you to lead a more active lifestyle, and can also protect you from injury. Since much of the weakening we associate with old age is directly related to loss of muscle from inactivity, strength training also keeps you feeling young. In fact, without muscle, the most basic daily tasks - like getting out of bed or dressing yourself - can become overwhelming. Studies show that adding a modest strength routine to your workout can make a difference even if you’re 90 years old. A bonus is that strength training builds stronger bones and makes you less prone to osteoporosis (weakening of the bones).

Q: If I start strength training, how can I avoid getting big, bulky muscles?
A: Not to worry. Actually the harder question would be: How do I build big, bulky muscles? Lifting weights two to three days a week will not turn you into a muscle man or woman. Women especially have a hard time getting “bulked up,” even if they want to, because they have much lower levels of testosterone, the male hormone necessary for muscle hypertrophy (increase in muscle fiber size).

Q: My instructor tells me to focus on my breathing while I’m strength training. Why?
A: Most people don’t realize how important breathing is during a workout. They have a tendency to breathe erratically or to hold their breath, especially when they’re doing a difficult move. When you hold your breath, your blood pressure goes up, and then quickly comes down when you release it. This kind of a deep drop might cause you to become dizzy or pass out, and, if you have a heart condition, it could cause more serious problems. You should focus on exhaling during the harder phase of the exercise (usually lifting, pushing or pulling the weight) and inhaling during the easier phase.

Q: Is it true — no pain, no gain?
A: Before we answer, an important distinction needs to be made. There is a huge difference between pain and discomfort. When you begin an exercise program, you’re definitely going to feel some discomfort - muscle soreness, tenderness, that sort of thing. It’s absolutely normal, and if you don’t feel sore, that may be a sign you aren’t working hard enough. On the other hand, pain - as in sharp pain in your limbs, joints or chest - isn’t good. If you experience this kind of pain, stop immediately. If the pain is persistent, consult a physician.

Q: What if I miss a workout? Can I make it up the next day?
A: Short answer: yes - but with a word of caution. During the course of a week, you should try to work out at least three times, and, just as important, you should spread your exercise days throughout the week, allowing your body time to recover. If you miss a single workout and have the time to make it up, then go ahead and do it. However, should you miss more than one session, it is not a good idea to cram all of your exercise sessions back to back just to fit them in within the week. Working out three days in a row after four days off, for example, puts you at risk of injury and burnout. Best to just pick up your workout on the next scheduled day and focus on doing better next week.

Q: Why is it good to take a day off in between strength-training sessions?
A: Your muscle fibers literally break down during strength training, and your body needs time to repair these muscular “micro tears.” In fact, it’s theorized that your muscles become stronger during this rebuilding process - not while you’re actually lifting weights. If you work the same muscle group too soon, the muscle fibers don’t get adequate time to repair. If you exercise too often without allowing your body enough rest, you won’t make progress, and you could even experience symptoms of over-training, such as fatigue, sleeplessness and depression.

Q: Why is it important to perform aerobic exercise within your heart-rate training range?
A: Because you get the best results when you do. Aerobic or cardiovascular exercise makes your heart, lungs and circulatory system stronger. That translates to increased stamina and, for some of us, a slimmer waistline. If your heart rate is above or below the training range, you won’t be reaping these benefits as effectively. Training too hard will cause you to become tired or overheated, and you’re more likely to hurt yourself by placing stress on tired muscles. If you’re not working hard enough, your cardiovascular system won’t be challenged enough, and you won’t see results. There are a number of ways to tell if you’re in your training range from using heart rate monitors to taking your pulse. Easiest method: the talk/sing test. If you can carry on a conversation while you’re working out, you’re training aerobically; if you can’t talk, you’re working too hard, and you should slow down; if you can sing, however, you’re not working hard enough and you should step it up a bit.

Q: What’s better to do first, cardiovascular exercise or strength training?
A: It really doesn’t matter which you do first. What is important, however, is changing the order of the exercises you do, since your body will adapt to any workout that becomes too much of a routine, and your progress will slow down. Try doing your cardio workout first for two weeks, then switch things around and strength train first for the
next two weeks. Continue to challenge your body in small ways, and you will continue to make progress with each workout.

**Q: Is it better to work out in the morning?**

**A:** Yes. But only if you’re a morning person. It’s also better to work out in the evening if you’re an evening person. The principle here is to plan your exercise session for the time of day when you’re most likely to do it. One caution: If you have trouble falling asleep at night, don’t exercise within four hours of bedtime; some people find that a late workout is overstimulating and interferes with sleep.

**Q: How many calories do I need?**

Most of us understand that weight management depends upon the energy balance equation; the amount of energy you put into your body (food calories) versus the amount of energy you expend (activity). But how do you know how many calories your body needs to reach or maintain a certain weight? Understanding your body’s energy requirements can help guide you when making food choices.

**The Accurate Way**

There are three primary components that make up your body’s energy expenditure. Adding these three components together, basal metabolic rate, energy expended during physical activity, and the thermic effect of food is the most accurate way of determining how many calories your body requires each day.

- **Basal Metabolic Rate (BMR):** Most of the body’s energy, about 60-70%, goes to supporting the ongoing metabolic work of the body’s cells. This includes such activities as heartbeat, respiration and maintaining body temperature. To determine your BMR:
  - For adult males - Multiply the body weight by 10; add double the body weight to this value. [i.e., for a 150 lb male, 1,500 + (2 x 150)=1,800 cal/day BMR]
  - For adult females - Multiply body weight by 10; add the body weight to this value. [i.e., for a 120 lb female, 1,200 + 120=1,320 cal/day BMR]

- **Energy Expended During Physical Activity:** The second component of the equation depends upon your level of physical activity. Physical activity has a profound effect on human energy expenditure and contributes 20-30% to the body’s total energy output. One of the most reliable methods in calculating calories burned during physical activity is the Metabolic Energy (MET) Method.

- **Thermic Effect of Food:** The last component to calculate has to do with your body’s management of food. The increase in energy required to digest food is referred to as the thermic effect of food (TEF) and it’s simple to determine: TEF = total kcals consumed x 10% [i.e., 2,000 kcals consumed/day x 0.10 = 200 kcals expended for TEF]

**The Easy Way**

If all of those calculations seem too confusing or tedious, you can roughly estimate your daily calorie requirements using this simple formula:

- For sedentary people: Weight x 10 = estimated cal/day
- For moderately active people (3-4 aerobic sessions/week): Weight x 13 = estimated cal/day
- For active people (5-7 aerobic sessions/week): Weight x 15 = estimated cal/day

**Q: What is body mass index (BMI)?**

Body mass index assesses your body weight relative to height. It’s a useful, indirect measure of body composition because it correlates highly with body fat in most people. Weight in kilograms is divided by height in meters squared (kg/m2). In studies by the National Center for Health Statistics,

- BMI values less than 18.5 are considered underweight.
- BMI values from 18.5 to 24.9 are healthy.
- Overweight is defined as a body mass index of 25.0 to less than 30.0. A BMI of about 25 kg/m2 corresponds to about 10 percent over ideal body weight. People with BMIs in this range have an increased risk of heart and blood vessel disease.
- Obesity is defined as a BMI of 30.0 or greater (based on NIH guidelines) — about 30 pounds or more overweight. People with BMIs of 30 or more are at higher risk of cardiovascular disease.
- Extreme obesity is defined as a BMI of 40 or greater.

Some well-trained people with dense muscle mass may have a high BMI score but very little body fat. For them, the waist circumference, the skinfold thickness or more direct methods of measuring body fat may be more useful measures.

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