

Are you wasting your time at the gym?

I was working out at the gym the other day -- and granted, I'm no fitness guru, but I know enough to recognize when someone is not working out properly. I was surprised by what I saw, but experts say I shouldn't have been: "Roughly 85 to 90 percent of the people in the gym are NOT getting the maximum benefit from their workouts -- they're basically window shopping," reports John Porcari, Ph.D., F.A.C.S.M., a professor in the Department of Exercise and Sports Science at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse.

If so many of us are not working out properly, should we just throw in the towel?

"It's certainly better than sitting on the couch in front of the television munching on a pizza, but realistically, if you're not working both your heart and muscles -- well, you will not see much return on your time," says Dr. Lewis Maharam, a physician specializing in sports medicine and the medical director of the New York City Marathon.

The bottom line: Make the most of your gym experience by looking out for the six major mistakes that most people make when doing fitness training.

All cardio -- No strength training

Many people seem to think that the best way to lose weight is to sweat it off, so they get on the bike, stair stepper, or treadmill and try to "work off the fat." While cardiovascular exercise is a very important component of fitness, it's not the most effective way, in and of itself, to lose unwanted pounds or to gain overall fitness and well being.

"Strength training is a necessary part of a balanced workout -- it increases your strength, balance, coordination and calorie burning power. People don't realize that muscle mass drives your metabolism better than aerobic training. In fact, if you lose ten pounds doing aerobic exercise alone, 30 percent of what you lose is much-needed muscle mass, not fat. But if you lose ten pounds by using both aerobic and strength training, you'll only lose about 10 percent muscle mass -- this keeps your metabolism moving at a fast pace," explains Dr. Porcari.

Cardio -- Without the sweat

You hop on your favorite machine, magazine in hand, for 30 minutes -- maybe even an hour -- reading, listening to music, or watching TV along the way. So what if you didn't break a sweat? Does it really matter?

"If you're not sweating, you're not working -- if you haven't raised your body temperature a half a degree, which causes sweating, then you haven't worked out," says Dr. Maharam.

The idea behind cardiovascular fitness is to get the heart pumping -- and that occurs by exercising within your target heart rate zone for a minimum of 20 minutes.

A person's target heart rate is the rate at which the heart should pump during exercise -- experts say it should be between 60 and 80 percent of your maximum heart rate for optimal cardiovascular fitness. It's unlikely that you'll achieve this state if you're reading the paper or talking on the phone while exercising.

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Cardio -- Leaning won't get you lean

Another common fitness faux pas is leaning on the stair stepper, elliptical trainer or treadmill. Not only is this position hard on both the wrists and the back, but it can significantly lower the intensity and effectiveness of your workout. Moreover, studies have shown a decrease of as much as 25 percent of the energy utilized if you lean on the machine -- which also means you're burning fewer calories.

All strength training -- No cardio

Yes, strength training builds muscles, but if you don't exercise one of the most important muscles -- the heart -- you're short-changing yourself. Besides burning calories, aerobic exercise is critical in preventing heart disease, as well as helping ailments such as sleep disorders, diabetes, anxiety and depression.

Strength training -- No form

I was at one of those famous, fancy gyms a few months ago, and I noticed a trainer with a client, chatting up a storm. The client was doing bicep curls -- he was jerking the bar, using light weights, and was clearly more focused on the conversation than the task at hand.

"Strength training requires intense focus and concentration on all aspects of the exercise, including breathing, technique, repetitions and amount of weight," says Patricia Moreno, a celebrity trainer in New York City and Los Angeles.

"If you ignore any of these components, you will severely limit the effectiveness of your training, not to mention put yourself at risk for injury."

Strength training -- Just going through the motions

In almost any gym, you can spot a person half-heartedly lifting weights without expending much effort. "If you don't challenge the body, the workout isn't going to do anything for you," says Moreno.

What amount of weight and how many repetitions do you need to "challenge the body?" Most experts recommend doing three sets of between eight and 12 repetitions with about 65 to 80 percent of your maximum resistance. (Your maximum resistance is the most weight you can lift in one repetition, while keeping perfect form.)

"Doing the same old routine month after month can lose its efficiency -- sometimes your body needs a bit of a shock to keep it moving. Try revising your routine about every 12 weeks," adds Moreno.

This might all sound a bit intimidating, but don't let it scare you -- fitness books, videos, or a good personal trainer (with American College of Sports Medicine credentials) are all excellent resources for helping you fine-tune your workout to obtain maximum effectiveness.

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