

Increasing our Fitness: How to Get Started

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Progressive Overload Training

Let's start with a definition of what we're trying to do when we want to increase our fitness, whether it's cardiovascular fitness, strength, speed, whatever. It's called "Progressive Overload Training," and it helps to break the phrase down in reverse.

The "training" part means that we're performing activities with the purpose of improving our fitness. We set aside time from our day to exercise. We join a health club or a running group or a swim team. We expend effort and endure discomfort short term to see long term results.

The "overload" part means that we are asking our bodies to do more than they are usually required to do in a normal day. Our bodies respond to this overload by increasing fitness to better handle the same load in the future. Two ways that we can overload our bodies are with a higher intensity (e.g., run faster or lift heavier weights) or with a higher volume (e.g., run farther or lift more frequently).

The "progressive" part means that we are gradually increasing the amount that we do each day over the long term. This does not mean that we increase the amount every time we work out. Rather, we attempt to achieve a new level of performance over an extended period of time, measured best in months and years rather than in days and weeks.

The SAID Principle

The "SAID Principle," or Specific Adaptation to Imposed Demands, refers to how precisely our bodies adapt to the stresses they endure. The process of tanning is the perfect example of SAID. Stay in the sun long enough, and the skin will respond by increasing its pigment. However, this pigmentation occurs only within those areas receiving sunlight and in correlation to the amount of exposure. A razor-thin line delineates areas of differing exposure.

The body's response to training is very specific, much like the skin's response to sunlight. Cycling improves our ability at cycling, running improves our ability to run, and lifting improves our ability to lift, etc., more than for any other activity. So, the best way to get better at anything is to do lots of that specific thing (e.g., more diving).

Of course, we know that we can supplement our direct participation in a sport with other types of training. The SAID Principle, however, tells us that exercises that mimic motions in our sport will have the greatest impact on our performance.

Strength vs. Endurance

What specific exercises constitute strength training and what constitute endurance training? This is actually a continuum, since every exercise will both strengthen and improve endurance. However, some exercises emphasize one over the other, and we ideally want to include both since they complement each other.

Strength training is a term which describes any kind of training that is done with the purpose of increasing the maximum power that a muscle can achieve. Obviously, weight training is a part of this, but activities like sprinting, plyometrics, and hill running can also be considered strength training. They all share in common an emphasis on short, high intensity muscle contractions, and they all will result in an increase in maximum power.

Endurance training is a term which describes any kind of training that is done with the purpose of increasing a muscle's resistance to fatigue. More relevantly, exercise that uses large muscle groups for extended periods of time are typically considered "cardiovascular" endurance training.

This is where the swimming, cycling, running, etc., play an important role. We care not only about increasing our legs' resistance to fatigue, for example, but we also care about conditioning our hearts and lungs. Curling dumbbells isn't going to do much to affect this, since small muscle groups like your biceps will fatigue before becoming a great burden on your cardiovascular system. That's why it takes repetitive use of large muscle groups, such as your legs in cycling, as well as multiple muscle groups working together, such as in swimming, to improve our cardiovascular systems.

Can we develop strength along with endurance? Absolutely, and that's exactly what we're going for when we incorporate weight lifting into our cardiovascular training programs.

Choosing an Activity

Enthusiasts endlessly debate which sport is "the best" for developing fitness, but they're missing the point. Until you get to a competitive level, your cardiovascular fitness depends more on the amount of time and consistency of effort spent exercising rather than on how you choose to do it. The SAID Principle dictates only that we must stress our hearts and lungs to improve our cardiovascular fitness. Thus, the activity that will result in the fastest and most lasting gains in fitness will be the one that you enjoy doing most. For some reason, many people have a hard time grasping this seemingly common sense concept.

Cross-training can help to alleviate the boredom of a routine. However, focus on one sport until you develop a good base of fitness before branching out into other activities.

Besides, a good program involves many different types of workouts with frequent changes in schedule regardless of the sport.

A Sample Schedule

The resources mentioned in other articles will help you more than these general guidelines. However, the templates provided below encompass much of what is truly important when beginning any fitness program.

Note that the specific days of the week listed are arbitrary. Start your program to fit around your personal schedule.

Take a day off if you feel especially fatigued from training or other sources of stress. Repeat weeks if you do not feel ready to progress. If you must stop training for illness or other reasons, go back one week for every three days off and start the program again from that point.

Begin each cardio workout with a ten minute warm-up period, and end with a five minute cool-down. In between, maintain an intensity that is easy enough that you could hold a conversation with someone, but hard enough that you wouldn't want to.

See "Strength Training for an Active Lifestyle" and the references listing within for ideas on what to do during the weight sessions.

	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
Week 1	30 min cardio	30 min cardio	Rest	30 min cardio	30 min cardio	Rest	Rest
Week 2	35 min cardio	30 min cardio	Rest	35 min cardio	30 min cardio	Rest	Rest
Week 3	35 min cardio	30 min cardio	Weights	35 min cardio	30 min cardio	Weights	Rest
Week 4	40 min cardio	30 min cardio	Weights	35 min cardio	30 min cardio	Weights	Rest
Week 5	45 min cardio	30 min cardio	Weights	35 min cardio	30 min cardio	Weights	Rest
Week 6	45 min cardio	30 min cardio	Weights	35 min cardio	30 min cardio	30 min cardio Weights	Rest
Week 7	50 min cardio	30 min cardio	Weights	40 min cardio	30 min cardio	30 min cardio Weights	Rest
Week 8	55 min cardio	35 min cardio	Weights	40 min cardio	30 min cardio	30 min cardio Weights	Rest
Week 9	55 min cardio	40 min cardio	Weights	45 min cardio	35 min cardio	30 min cardio Weights	Rest
Week 10	60 min cardio	45 min cardio	Weights	45 min cardio	35 min cardio	30 min cardio Weights	Rest
Week 11	60 min cardio	45 min cardio	Weights	45 min cardio	40 min cardio	35 min cardio Weights	Rest
Week 12	60 min cardio	45 min cardio	Weights	50 min cardio	40 min cardio	40 min cardio Weights	Rest