

Newsletter

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The ten faux pas of fitness

Suzanne Schlosberg (Shape Magazine - June 2003)

People make small but costly mistakes when exercising every day, and one tiny change can have a huge impact on their results, says Los Angeles-based trainer Ken Alan, a spokesman for the American Council on Exercise. Thanks to Alan, and the panel of training experts who weighed in on these faux pas and fixes, you'll error-proof your exercise and see tremendous payoffs, and the time you invest in your workouts will be smart and well-spent. We begin with five errors often made in your approach to exercise, then we'll take a look at five moves frequently flubbed.

1. **the faux pas; *Getting married to your strength routine***

the facts If you do the same routine over and over, your muscles will simply adapt; you're likely to hit a plateau because each exercise stimulates only a limited number of muscle fibers. However, if you challenge your muscles from a variety of angles by adding or alternating moves periodically, you'll get significantly more fibers into the act and develop more tone and strength.

the fix For each muscle group, learn an additional 2 or 3 exercises, trying new angles and equipment. (If you can't get instruction from a trainer, there are plenty of books and videos organized by routine for each body part.) For instance, if you usually do the dumbbell chest press on a flat bench, try it at an incline. If you normally use the chest-press machine, try the dumbbell chest press or the bench press with a barbell. Expand your repertoire enough so that you can change your entire routine every 6-8 weeks.

2. **the faux pas; *Performing your reps too quickly***

the facts If you zoom through your repetitions when strength training, you'll be using momentum instead of muscle power. You won't get the same stimulus for muscle building and you won't burn as many calories. You'll also be more susceptible to training injuries such as torn muscles or connective tissue.

the fix Take 6 seconds to perform each repetition: 2 seconds to lift the weight and 4 seconds to lower it. (Since you have gravity to help you lower the weight, you need to slow down even more on this phase in order to give your muscles a sufficient challenge.) Our experts agree that slowing down is the single most significant change you can make to get better results from strength training.

3. **the faux pas; *Exercising too hard, too often***

the facts If you don't rest enough between hard cardio or strength workouts, you'll stop making progress and may even lose some of the fitness you've gained. You're also likely to burn out on exercise.

the fix To keep your muscles fresh and your motivation high, alternate shorter tougher cardio workouts (for instance, 20 minutes) with longer, easier days (40-60 minutes). Don't go all out more than twice a week. Keep in mind that the more intensely you train, the more time your body needs to recover. It's a good idea to do a couple of tough workouts and take 1 day completely off each week. On the strength-training front, take at least 1 day off between sessions that work the same muscle group.

4. **the faux pas; *Coasting on your cardio***

the facts Sticking with the same aerobic workout can sabotage your results as much as pushing too hard. To truly boost your fitness (which enables you to burn more calories with less effort), you need to

venture outside your comfort zone a couple of times a week, to the point where you're somewhat winded and can feel your heart pounding.

the fix Instead of zoning out or doing moderate-intensity cardio all the time, mix in some high-intensity intervals twice a week. For instance, after warming up for 10 minutes on the treadmill, increase the speed or incline for 30 seconds to 1 minute, then recover with 1-3 minutes of easy-to-moderate exercise. Keep alternating for 10-20 minutes, then cool down. You also may want to do longer high-intensity intervals-say, 5 minutes-where you don't push quite as hard as you do on the shorter ones.

5. **the faux pas; Lifting the wrong amount of weight**

the facts If you lift weights that are too light, you won't see improvements in strength, tone or bone density. If you lift weights that are too heavy, you'll compromise proper form, increasing your injury risk. You'll also be forced to recruit additional muscles, for instance, using your entire body to complete a biceps curl, thus cheating the targeted muscles of a good workout.

the fix for the most significant strength building, perform 4-6 repetitions per set; for more moderate strength building, perform 8-12 repetitions per set, choosing weights heavy enough that you struggle through your final few reps, but not so heavy that your form falls apart. If you get to your final rep and feel that you could perform another one, increase the weight by 5-10 percent. You may find that when you've considerably increased the amount of weight you're using, you'll drop to fewer reps, which is fine, as long as your targeted muscles are fatigued by the final rep. Don't worry: Lifting to fatigue will not leave you with monstrous muscles.

6. **Squat - the faux pas; Letting your knees shoot ahead of your toes, lifting your heels, dropping your knees inward**

the facts These mistakes place excess pressure on the tendons and ligaments of the knee.

the fix Holding a dumbbell in each hand, stand with your feet hipwidth apart, legs straight but not locked, chest lifted, abs contracted. Keep body weight toward heels and bend knees to sit back and down, lowering thighs to as parallel a position to ground as possible, torso erect and knees aligned with ankles (shown). Straighten legs to stand back up. *Strengthens buttocks, quadriceps and hamstrings.*



7. **Bent over Lat row - the faux pas; Rounding your spine and not flexing from your hips, pulling the weights up too far behind you**

the facts These mistakes place stress on your spine and reduce the demand on your back muscles, making the move less effective.

the fix Stand with feet hip-width apart and hold a dumbbell in each hand, arms by sides. Bend knees and flex forward from the hips at about 90 degrees. Let arms hang in line with shoulders, palms facing in. Contract abs to support back. Draw shoulder blades down and together; maintaining body position, bend elbows up and in toward waist until upper arms are in line with torso and forearms are perpendicular to ground, knuckles pointing down (shown). Slowly straighten arms to starting position without changing torso position. *Strengthens middle back, rear shoulders and biceps*



8. Triceps kickback - the faux pas; Swinging your upper arm, dropping your opposite shoulder, trying to lift your arm and the weight too high behind you

the facts When you make any of these mistakes, your triceps aren't sufficiently challenged and you also may place stress on your shoulder and elbow joints.

the fix Hold a dumbbell in your right hand and stand to the right of the long side of a bench, feet hip-width apart or in a staggered stance. (you also can kneel on the bench with your left knee.) Flex forward at hips at about 90 degrees and place left hand on bench for support. Keeping torso stationary, bend right elbow so upper arm is parallel to ground and forearm is perpendicular to ground, palm facing in. Position elbow close to waist and contract abs. Keeping upper arm still, use triceps to straighten arm behind you until end of dumbbell points down (shown). Slowly bend elbow to return to perpendicular position. *Strengthens triceps*



9. Crunch - the faux pas; Jerking your neck, not lifting shoulders, failing to engage abs

the facts These mistakes will result in a sore neck and your abs won't get any firmer.

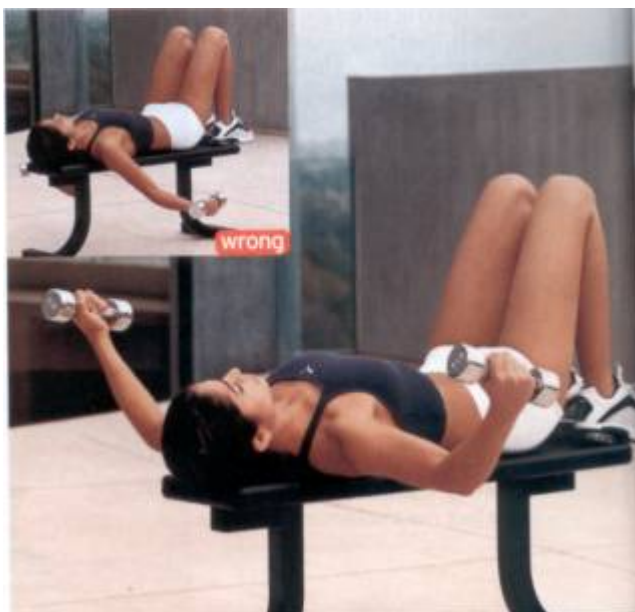
the fix Lie on your back with knees bent and feet flat on mat, hipwidth apart. Place hands behind head, thumbs behind ears, fingers unclasped. Hold elbows out to the sides. Contracting abs, draw hips and lower ribs together, keeping buttocks relaxed. Without pulling on neck or drawing elbows in, curl up and forward, keeping head and neck relaxed as shoulder blades lift off mat (shown). Hold then slowly lower back down. *Strengthens abdominals*



10. **Dumbbell bench fly - the faux pas; Lowering your arms too far**

the facts This mistake places major stress on your shoulders and rotator cuff, the delicate muscles that sit underneath the shoulders. Plus, it becomes difficult to press arms up and use the chest muscles effectively.

the fix Lie face up on bench, knees bent and feet on edge. Hold a dumbbell in each hand, arms extended above midchest, in a slight arc, palms in. Contract abs and keep chin level. Maintaining elbow arc, lower elbows down and out to the side until they are even with or slightly below shoulders (shown). Press dumbbells up and in to starting position, without letting dumbbells touch or allowing shoulder blades to rise off the bench. *Strengthens chest and front shoulder*



Mistake-proof your mind set

Your attitude may be the one final adjustment you need to maximize your results. Avoid these three mental missteps:

Focusing on the numbers

Instead of worrying over how many calories you burn or steps you climb, focus on the energy and the strength you feel and how wonderfully you're treating your body. While monitoring your intensity and applying the numbers to ensure you're mixing things up enough is critical for optimum progress, you should simply be aware, not fixating.

Obsessing over one body part

Focusing too much on your "problem area" can backfire, causing you to neglect other muscle groups that are as important for your appearance as they are for your fitness. For instance, if your midsection is your main concern, doing hundreds of crunches isn't the answer: sure, do ab exercises for tone, but don't forget that developing your chest, back and shoulders can take the focus off your middle. Always strive for a balanced workout.

Shying away from the unfamiliar

It's only natural to be intimidated by equipment you've never used or classes you've never taken. But venturing into new territory may be just the ticket to better results. If you've been avoiding free weights, ask a trainer to teach you a few dumbbell exercises; if you've shied away from Spinning, hop on a bike. Getting past your fears also will give you a sense of accomplishment and confidence-and what could feel better than conquering the unknown.