

## **What's Your Focus?**



**Why are you exercising? For health and longevity? For weight loss? For fitness performance? Here's how to gear your fitness routine to your personal goals.**

Mario Lisak, a carpenter in Lincoln, Neb., climbs ladders and hauls lumber five days a week. Returning home exhausted from the physical demands of his job, Mario can't imagine jogging around the neighborhood or pumping iron. He'd much rather work in the garden or take a brisk walk with his wife. A bit of belly fat doesn't embarrass Mario, who doesn't give a rip about six-pack abs or a record-setting bench press. This guy just wants to maintain good health for the long haul.

Mark Cohen, a Washington, D.C., attorney, set a New Year's weight-loss resolution last January. To date, he's lost 32 pounds. Now just 10 pounds from his goal, he maintains a strict weight-control program (designed by his personal trainer) that includes regular, challenging workouts and riding his bicycle to and from work daily.

Meanwhile, across town, Sarah Farmer, 36, is training for the World Sports Aerobics Championship. She's already reduced her body fat to 12 percent and has the kind of muscle definition most guys half her age would die for. She trains three hours daily to hone her athletic performance, rehearsing drills like a concert pianist before a *début* at Carnegie Hall.

While all three of these people exercise, each one is doing so for a very different purpose: Mario wants to live a long, healthy life; Mark wants to lose weight; Sara wants to achieve a high level of athletic performance. It's only logical that people with such different priorities would train with distinct kinds of rhythm, focus and intensity. But just how does the average person go about determining what kind of fitness approach will most likely provide them the best possible payoffs with the least amount of risk or misguided effort? This is perhaps the most important and least addressed question in all of fitness literature.

#### Finding Your Path

The realm of fitness is rife with tradeoffs: Easy, low-key workouts can keep you healthy but may not be nearly intense enough to help you achieve your goal weight or appearance. More rigorous weight loss and muscle-building programs can slim you down and improve your general fitness but may fail to fully optimize your athletic performance. Meanwhile, highly demanding, hardcore programs that take you to a peak level of athletic accomplishment require a level of exertion that relatively few can tolerate. Moreover, if not balanced by adequate rest and good nutrition, such intensive training programs can actually wind up undermining general health and vitality.

The only way to get the "right" fitness program for you is to carefully weigh the demands, risks and payoffs inherent in each approach. And that requires some know-how.

In her book *Ultimate Fitness: The Quest for Truth About Exercise and Health*, Gina Kolata, a science reporter for the New York Times and a self-described fitness nut, dispels a variety of perplexing confusions and much-beloved myths about what fitness approaches work best for various purposes. She also confirms one very important and well-established fact: that the success of any fitness plan necessarily depends on tailoring your training to a specific purpose or goal.

Much of the fitness wisdom and advice out there, as Kolata's book amply demonstrates, is either wrong or misleading. To make matters worse, even much of the advice that is accurate is geared toward outcomes that may have nothing to do with your primary desires.

What you need, of course, is a sustainable exercise program that develops maximal benefits in your primary areas of concern, without putting you through more effort than necessary – or causing you risks you'd rather avoid.

The difficulty lies in sorting through a lot of contradictory information about what types of diet and exercise are most likely to get you where you want to go.

### Finding Your Balance

Regardless of your goals, all the research does agree on one point: True health and fitness of any kind depends on your willingness to embrace some kind of exercise for the long haul. That's because you'll derive far more benefit from a lifetime of moderate walking than a week of grueling training if you hate it, burn out and quit.

Health experts know this, that's why, generally speaking, their recommendations tend to emphasize the lowest possible levels of effort and exertion: They'd rather aim low than scare anyone off. Since most people who start exercising gradually ramp up their efforts as they feel stronger and more energetic, this initial no-pressure approach may be a good thing.

On the other hand, if you're looking to change your shape or athletic ability, it's important to realize that your routine must be challenging enough to offer the stimulus for physiological change. There's nothing more discouraging than exercising for months without seeing results. Unfortunately, based on widely distributed general-health recommendations ("Just walk for 20 to 30 minutes a day!"), that's precisely what many people wind up doing.

The best way to cement your chances of success is to select a realistic, targeted approach based on your top priority. So, are you mostly interested in weight loss, health and longevity, or athletic performance? You don't have to be married to any one choice for life, of course (many people care passionately about all three), but think: Which is most important to you as of right now? Weigh what you want to achieve with how hard you are willing to work, then dive in.

### Health and Longevity

Mario Lisak is active in his daily work but doesn't like to put in much additional time exercising. He'd sooner spend time with his family than trudge along a trail or pump iron at the gym. On the other hand, he's aware of the medical benefits of exercise and hopes to live a long and healthy life, so instead of "working out" he balances the demands of his job by tending to his garden and taking long, leisurely walks with his wife.

Although he could certainly improve on his laid-back approach to fitness, Mario is not entirely off track. The greatest health benefits from exercise come with low-to-moderate levels of exertion. And, despite the claims of some fitness fanatics, the health benefits of exercise don't increase dramatically as you ratchet up the workouts. In fact, some of the healthiest, longest-living individuals follow relatively low-intensity regimes like Qigong, yoga and walking, which rarely cause them to break a sweat.

To encourage sedentary people to become just a little more active, the medical community has, over the past decade, gradually lowered the recommendations for minimum exercise from 30 minutes a day to 20 minutes three times a week. The trouble is, those recommendations have not at all kept pace with the obesity epidemic and its associated diseases. Being sedentary is bad in itself, but failing to get enough exercise to maintain your weight makes matters far, far worse. And over time, both conditions set you up for diseases that can kill you.

So now, many experts have upped their prescriptions for exercise to an hour a day, the idea being that the double whammy of burning more calories while getting more aerobic exercise will give you a more powerful nudge toward proper weight and health. The trouble is, if an hour a day of exercise sounds so impossible or unappealing to an out-of-shape individual that he or she ends up doing nothing, that recommendation can easily backfire.

The upshot is this: If you are near your ideal weight and just want to keep your ticker in decent shape, 30 minutes a day will probably do you. If you are overweight and can't face the idea of a full 60 minutes, start with 30 and work your way up. If your weight poses a threat to your health, do everything you can to get in that 60 minutes however you can, knowing the payoffs will be worth it.

The good news is, it's not necessary to complete the recommended time in one session; you can break it up into several mini-bouts of exercise throughout the day.

### Getting the Basics

A basic health-oriented fitness program involves eating a balanced diet (including some healthy fats) while avoiding refined sugars, processed carbohydrates and trans-fats. It requires drinking plenty of water and getting a moderate amount of aerobic exercise, such as walking or biking.

Just a little activity can provide excellent health benefits, but this doesn't mean it's a bad idea to push yourself to do more. Mario, for example, could reduce his risks of on-the-job injury by adding strength training to his routine.

A basic weightlifting program that includes progressively heavier lifts could help Mario maintain his youthful muscle mass into old age. Although Mario may not feel it happening, gradually he's losing about a pound of muscle every year – as we all do from about age 30 and up. Strong limbs and responsive muscles help avert falls and other injuries. By stimulating muscles with moderate training, Mario could avoid the frailty associated with old age. He could do more than live a longer life – he could live a more vital one. (For more on resistance training benefits for everybody, see *Across the Board*, page 96 of the printed version).

Along with strength, the aging body loses flexibility. If Mario added a Pilates or yoga class to his schedule, he could maintain a suppler spine, improve his balance and strengthen his abdominal muscles. Although some Pilates and yoga classes are challenging, you can also find easier, more restorative programs that emphasize healing and flexibility. Taking up a relaxing martial art, such as Tai Chi or qigong, can help you develop precisely the kind of poise and internal stability you need for a long and healthy life.

### Tips on Training for Health

#### DO:

Get at least 30 minutes of low-to-moderate activity on most, if not all, days of the week.

Pick activities you enjoy, and (if you like) that you can do with someone you love.

Monitor your weight. A little pudge won't hurt you, but obesity puts your health at serious risk.

Consider the possibility of gradually ramping up your fitness for even more quality-of-life benefits.

#### DON'T:

Expect massive changes in your body's appearance from minimal effort.

Ignore the importance of keeping your skeletal muscles strong and of keeping enough lean muscle mass in general (moderate weight training can help you stay stronger and more independent as you age)

Forget that your blood sugar levels, among other things, do stand to benefit from more intense exercise.

Get into a rut. Mix activities like walking or gardening with biking, swimming, yoga or Tai Chi.

## Weight Loss

Mark Cohen's weight-loss story is unusual mostly because he stuck to his weight-loss resolution. It turns out that Mark owes his success less to discipline than to a happy discovery made in the process of working toward his goal: He loves to exercise.

Mark's not alone. Once they begin exercising, many people – even those who don't consider themselves remotely athletic – find out that exercise feels better and is a lot more fun than they thought. And that's a blessed thing, because while a little moderate exercise provides plenty of health benefits, it takes a bigger commitment to remodel your body.

This is not a moral issue, but the product of simple mathematics and biochemistry: If you're out to lose weight, you're out to burn calories. A little gentle walking isn't going to do that. If you want to lose fat, you're going to have to work hard, work long, or (for best results) both. The only caveat here is, you have to not work so hard that you burn yourself out and wind up cutting your exercise sessions short, or that you get fed up and quit exercising altogether. Ultimately, you need to decide how hard you are willing to push, and how long you are willing to work.

As for all that business about "fat-burning zones" and "cardio zones," don't be too hasty to marry yourself to the former and eschew the latter. Whether you exercise for an hour at a moderate intensity in the 50 to 60 percent heart-rate range (often referred to as the "fat-burning" zone) or you go for shorter more rigorous bursts (say, 20 or 30 minutes) in the 60 to 70 percent "cardio zone" depends largely on the time you have available, and your willingness to break a sweat.

If you can hack working at higher intensity, you'll burn more calories, and thus more fat, than you will at a slower pace. Working more intensely also creates faster and more substantial fitness improvements (which can help keep you motivated) and tends to improve your body's insulin response (which may make it easier for you to keep weight off).

Of course, it's best to build up your intensity gradually so you don't burn out or hurt yourself. One way to do this involves what athletic trainers call "interval training."

Interval training can become very rigorous, but it starts as an easy way to experiment with your upper limits. While doing your cardio work, just increase your speed or resistance (the incline on the treadmill or the friction on a stationary bike) for a short burst of 10 to 60 seconds. Then return to a comfortable pace until you catch your breath. Adding little bursts of higher intensity (briefly increasing your pace from 6 to 8 m.p.h., for example) not only increases your caloric output, it also rapidly builds up your endurance, helping you become comfortable at greater levels of exertion.

At first, the strain of pushing your body beyond its comfort zone can feel downright unpleasant. But if you persist, you'll become accustomed to the effort and develop a baseline of conditioning that allows you to move into progressively more intense exercise without suffering. You may discover that intensity actually becomes pleasurable!

Resistance training with free-weights or weight machines can help support your cardiovascular efforts with added endurance and strength, but it won't necessarily help you drop unwanted fat. While it's true that active muscle tissue burns more calories than fat, don't be fooled into thinking it's a panacea. You simply can't lift weights and then hope that your added muscle will quietly burn off all your excess fat while you watch TV.

On the other hand, lifting weights can make a marked difference in how fit you look and feel, and by extension, in how successfully you stick with your fitness regimen. Strength gains come quickly and improve your ability to withstand any kind of exertion. This makes it far easier to engage in more intense bouts of exercise without injuring yourself or pooping out. And that makes exercise of any kind a lot more fun.

One last thing: Flexibility. The more you work out, the tighter your muscles tend to get. Unless you devote some time to stretching, you may find yourself looking and feeling hunched and bunched in the wrong spots, and you'll also be more likely to pull something you shouldn't. So stretch!

Whew! Cardio, weights, stretching and eating right? If all this sounds like a lot of work &ndahs; it is. Changing your appearance takes a strong, broad commitment. The good news: After a while you will likely learn to enjoy it. Honest. We swear.

### Tips on Training for Weight Loss

#### DO:

Set realistic short- and long-term goals for weight loss.

Get moderate to intense cardiovascular exercise 4 to 6 times a week. This will help you create a caloric deficit.

Aim for 30 minutes of higher intensity circuit or interval training for 2 to 3 of your cardio sessions. Schedule longer, lower intensity workouts for recovery on alternate days.

Weight train 2 to 3 times a week, focusing on compound joint exercises. Use enough weight to near failure at 10 to 12 reps.

Remember that beyond burning calories during your exercise sessions, you are trying to achieve increases in general fitness that will make it easier for you to maintain your weight.

#### DON'T:

Assume that because you are exercising, you can eat whatever you like. Good nutrition and portion control are both keys to your success.

Try to put on a lot of muscle weight at the same time you burn fat. Instead, if you want to do both, switch your focus every 12 weeks or so.

Neglect 5- to 10-minute warm-ups – they will make your exercise sessions far safer and much more comfortable.

Skimp on flexibility work – stretching keeps your body looking and feeling lithe. It also makes you more injury-resistant.

Rule out developing an athletic pursuit or striving for some type of athletic achievement that takes you outside the gym.

## Athletic Performance

For some people, athletic goals and competition provide the fuel for training. These folks don't care so much about looks or even longevity. They care about performance. And they'll do just about anything to get it, from grueling bouts of cardiovascular "threshold training," to 13-mile endurance runs, to nearly debilitating rounds of resistance work.

It's this focus on performance that motivates Sara Farmer to train three hours a day. Sarah has won the bronze medal at the National Sports Aerobics Championship twice, but like every athlete, she dreams of winning the gold. "I've always been competitive," she says, "and it's the effort to improve that makes exercise fun for me."

An incredible physique is just a side effect of Sara's training – not the focus. "I concentrate on sports-specific skills, not appearance," she explains.

Although Sarah has been athletic all her life, many of us who start exercising to improve health and lose weight eventually progress toward performance-oriented goals. This change in focus from appearance to accomplishment is in many ways necessary to maintain an exercise routine over time.

Many people yo-yo between fat and thin because after they reach their ideal weight they have nothing left to strive for. By concentrating on goals such as increasing your running distance or speed, you can monitor your improvement, however slight, and keep striving. This explains why hundreds of thousands of runners participate in marathons and triathlons even though only a handful have any hope of winning. The rest engage in a private competition to improve on their personal best, or focus on just crossing the finish line.

It's this ambitious group of recreational exercisers that most often succeed in staying in shape, but just like professional athletes, they can also suffer the ill effects of exercise.

While there are plenty of glorious benefits to hardcore athleticism, there are some downsides. Intense exercise increases free-radical activity, which can age your body and increase your susceptibility to some diseases, including cancer. High impact exercise can also put a lot of strain on your musculoskeletal system, especially your joints. Training too hard or too often compromises your immune system, stresses your organs and can sometimes disrupt a woman's menstrual cycle.

To mitigate these and other negative effects of exercise, you must plan your workout strategy in a way that emphasizes steady but gradual improvement and that allows for proper recovery cycles. You also need to get plenty of rest and adequate nutrition. Eat as "clean" as you possibly can, emphasizing plenty of antioxidant-rich vegetables and fruits, and feeding your muscles with plenty of high-quality protein.

Above all, though, don't try to make rapid improvements by overdoing it. Athletic training necessarily involves overreaching in order to stretch your capacity and skill, such as adding a mile a week to your long runs or a few pounds to your bench press. But this striving toward improvement can easily slip into what sports medicine defines as "overtraining syndrome" – a condition that occurs when you don't allow your body enough time to recover between exercise bouts, causing your performance to lag.

You can tell something's amiss when you feel sluggish and have to push yourself through workouts you usually enjoy. You may put on weight and lose strength. You might become irritable and susceptible to infections or find your skin breaking out. Women can develop hormonal imbalances that lead to irregular menstrual cycles and reduced fertility. As bad as all this might sound, the cure is easy: Just take a few days off, rest, and then resume your training at a more moderate level.

Whatever your sport, the real key to sustaining consistent athletic improvement lies in including enough balance and relief in your training program that you can be confident of continuing your athletic pursuits as long as you care to – even into your ripe old age.

So find a level of exercise you enjoy and then join the party. If you exercise a little, you'll derive substantial health benefits. Ratchet up the effort and you may begin to lose weight and reshape your body. Push hard enough to produce notable physiological and psychological changes and you may well discover that training becomes a rewarding daily habit. Or even a passion, maybe. And once you find your enjoyment in exercise, you'll have found the very best fitness focus of all.

### Tips on Training for Performance

#### DO:

Set performance-based goals.

Design and organize your workouts according to a solid periodization/recovery schedule.

Make nutrition a priority, regardless of whether you are watching your weight.

Recognize that extreme exertion can take a toll on your immunity and increases your body's rate of free-radical oxidation

Be sure to get enough omega-3 essential fatty acids and antioxidants through diet and supplementation.

Cross-train to avoid injury.

Get enough rest to help your body repair damage and rebuild energy stores.

#### DON'T:

Overlook your body's need and signals for rest and recovery or ignore the physical, mental and emotional signs of overtraining.

Waste your time and energy by exercising excessively or inefficiently · go for maximum impact with minimum effort.

Allow your workouts to become imbalanced (e.g., all cardio, no resistance, skipping flexibility, etc.).

Assume that you are healthy just because you are fit. Protect and monitor your general health, too!