

23 Ways to Get More Out of Your Workout Routine

March 2014 – Joe Vennare, Hybrid Athlete

Exercise isn't an exact science—think different strokes for different folks. But one fact rings true: *Something* is better than nothing. A healthy exercise habit should blend fun and fitness, effort with results. That's where these 23 tips come in. Instead of dreading the gym, learn to streamline the process using these healthy exercise habits to get more out a workout than ever before.

Finding Fitness—Your Action Plan

1. Commit. Yoda said it best: “Do or do not, there is no try.” Don't straddle the line between wanting to get fit and actually doing something about it. Take the first step towards healthier habits and commit to a 30-day fitness challenge . Go for a walk or run on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. Then perform a circuit of at least five bodyweight exercises on Tuesday and Thursday. Keep it up for a month to make the exercise habit really stick.

2. Make a plan. Without a good game plan, a trip to the gym can quickly become a complete waste of time. To avoid wandering aimlessly from one piece of equipment to the next, map out your workouts ahead of time and set clear training goals. When workouts have a purpose, we're more able to balance sweating with socializing (yes, it's OK to laugh a little—in fact, we encourage it!).

3. Stay on schedule. Habits don't just happen, they're formed. Figure out when there's time for exercise—first thing in the morning, at lunch, or after work. But don't stress; there is no right time to work out. Consistency is the real game-changer. Prioritize exercise, and form a healthy habit by sticking to the schedule every day.

4. Track your progress. Performing the same exact workout day after day will likely lead to a training plateau—the place where progress comes to a screeching halt. One way to avoid potential roadblocks is by keeping a workout journal (pretty much a dear diary for grown-ups). But instead of juicy gossip, record the exercises, sets, reps, and the amount of weight used during each training session. Then, use these notes to create new workouts that are more challenging than previous sessions.

5. Ask for help. Don't risk injuries by playing follow-the-leader with the biggest guy in the gym. Learn the dos and don'ts from the get-go. Talk to a trainer, get a fitness assessment, or consider investing a few training sessions to learn the ropes. Coaches have been shown to boost motivation, performance, and adherence to training routines.

6. Warm up. A proper warm-up should be part of every workout. But don't waste time and energy with outdated warm-up routines—side bends and toe touches went out with headbands and short-shorts. Whether or not you're still sweating to the oldies, stick to warm-ups that match the workout at hand. When in doubt, a dynamic warm-up to get a sweat going and prime the body for the real work that lies ahead.

7. Use perfect form. Who wants to keep making the same misstep when you can master the perfect form from day one? For a fundamental movement like the squat, be sure to stand tall with the chest up, shoulders back and down, and the core engaged. And below the belt, keep a soft bend in the knees while shifting your weight into the heels. Keeping up good form all workout-long is the best way to protect against injury and make workouts more effective to boot.

8. Show and tell. At some point willpower can run out and send those healthy intentions off the rails. Don't go it alone. Call in the reinforcements to boost motivation and encourage accountability. Try opening up to family and friends about your setbacks and successes. Or, consider starting a blog to get others involved in your get-fit journey. The more people enlisted in the support of the goal, the less likely you are to fail.

9. Compete. When workouts are a competition, winning means losing—weight that is. Whether it's going head-to-head against an opponent or against our own personal best, research suggests we perform better when we compete. Go all out against the clock, perform as many push-ups as possible, or try to set a new one-rep max. Even if we set our sights too high, it never hurts to have a bigger goal in mind.

10. Do you. Keep in mind, when it comes to exercise, pursuing perfection can be a slippery slope. Sure, it would be nice to have a six-pack or the perfect backside, but it's better to aim for fit, not flawless. Be wary of fitness products that seem too good to be true. Put your trust in science instead—regular exercise, not the Shake Weight, promote health and happiness.

11. Partner up. Everyone needs a little alone time. But flying solo at the gym is like bar hopping with no wingman—a lot of work and nothing to show for it. To get better results and enjoyment out of a workout, enlist the help of a training partner. With a trusty workout buddy in tow there will never be a need to ask a random for a spot—unless you're also asking for their number.

12. Mobilize. Believe it or not, there's more to that smartphone than Angry Birds. Use your mobile device to connect with a social network of like-minded fitness friends. Fitness-focused apps like Fitocracy and Gain Fitness are also great communities helping people to stay motivated, move more, and eat well with a little help from their (virtual) friends.

13. Be free. Think of exercise machines as the training wheels of strength workouts, and free weights (like dumbbells, kettlebells and barbells) as the real-deal tools for a lean, strong physique. Though strength routines will vary depending on personal goals, when in doubt, look to compound movements, and lifting more weight for few reps to shed more fat and build more muscle.

14. Multitask your movements. Total-body compound movements like the squat or deadlift utilize multiple muscle groups, joints, and energy systems. The result: A serious boost to heart rate and metabolism in a short amount of time.

15. Don't multitask your time. It might be tempting to fire off emails in between sets, but a trip to the gym should include more work than rest. Try upping the intensity by using a stopwatch to monitor rest between sets. For those with fitness and fat loss goals, keep breaks under 60 seconds and cap workouts at 45 minutes (full steam ahead!).

16. Try new things. Don't feel bad ditching the treadmill—there's a whole world of fitness out there waiting to be discovered. Try something new like swinging a kettlebell or busting a move at Zumba class. Learning new skills with new people in a new environment can go a long way towards making this exercise habit stick.

17. Run faster. Cardio-loving distance runners may prioritize pacing and mileage, but for those of us who are not so high on running (despite the runner's high) consider sprinting as your new holy grail. Sprinting all-out for 10 sets of 30-60 seconds can torch more fat in less time than a long run. Add some intensity and variety to workouts by performing shuttle runs, hill sprints, or 100-meter repeats with short recovery periods in between.

18. Walk it out. No need for speed? Walking works, too. As a matter of fact, the more steps we take the healthier we are likely to be. So whether it's a workout or part of an active lifestyle, walking may just be the easiest way to get fit.

19. Skip the gym. Yeah, we said it. But don't get the wrong idea—we're talking taking fitness outside the box. Fit a workout in anywhere, anytime. No equipment? No problem. Try bodyweight exercises, take a yoga class, or go for a run. Or, create a home gym with a set of dumbbells, a kettlebell, a resistance band, and a jump rope.

20. Just do it. Those who think they can and those who think they can't are both right. Use visualization, a positive affirmation, or winning mantra to boost motivation and get the most out of those workouts.

21. Make combos. No, not the delectable pizza-flavored pretzels. Combo, as in combining strength and cardio exercise into circuit-based workouts. To get strong and lean, perform an up-tempo workout by alternating between a strength move, like dumbbell curl and press, with a cardio move like burpees. Link up to eight exercises and perform each without rest before moving on to the next.

22. Rest. Regular exercise is a healthy habit. But with respect to exercise, too much of a good thing is called overtraining (or the point of diminishing returns where the body, immune system, and progress break down). Avoid a disaster by adhering to this equation: Results = Work + Recovery. Stretching, swimming, or yoga can all be part of an active recovery protocol. And never underestimate the importance of sleep!

23. Celebrate progress. Forming a new habit is challenging, so set manageable goals and take small, actionable steps towards those healthy workout habits. Remember, change doesn't happen overnight. So when you run your first 5K celebrate with a healthier homemade treat. Or, take a break from all this healthy habits business and allow yourself an epic cheat day. It's actually good for you—once in a while.