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Post-Workout Muscle Recovery: How to Let Your Muscles Heal and Why

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To become stronger, faster, and fitter, you have to push your body harder. But then you have to rest, too.

All workouts, especially tough ones, stress the body. You're fatiguing, or tiring out, various muscles when you work out, which means you're causing microscopic damage to muscle cells. Hormone and enzyme levels fluctuate, and inflammation actually increases, explains Chris Kolba, PhD, a physical therapist at the Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center in Columbus.

The changes you're causing can do your body a lot of good. They lead to muscle growth, fat loss, improved insulin sensitivity, reduced inflammation, better cardiovascular health, and an overall healthier body. But you need to give your body time for those good changes to happen before you start stressing it out again.

"This rest, called exercise recovery, is what allows people to [benefit] from their workouts," Dr. Kolba says, allowing you to get the maximum benefit from every exercise session.

Rest and Recovery Let Your Muscles Heal and Make You Stronger

The damage that exercise causes triggers your body's immune system to repair that damage, explains Adam Rivadeneyra, MD, a sports medicine physician with the Hoag Orthopedic Institute and

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"But you have to cause some damage to your body for it to adapt," Dr. Rivadeneyra says.

Repeated again and again, this process of stress and recovery is what results in improved health and fitness.

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Post-Workout Muscle Recovery Helps Keeps You Safe and Injury-Free

Just don't skimp on the rest and recovery part. Rest helps reenergize the body so you have the stamina to give it your all during your next workout, says Melissa Leber, MD, an orthopedic surgeon at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York City. You can't push it to your maximum without giving your body time to recoup in between. That's overtraining.

"Overtraining can lead to overuse, which can lead to burnout and injury," Dr. Leber explains. Common overuse injuries include iliotibial band syndrome, stress fractures, patellofemoral syndrome (runner's knee), and muscle strains.

What's more, research suggests inadequate rest and recovery can contribute to poor immune function, neurological changes, hormonal disturbances, and depression.^[1]

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The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans recommend spreading out weekly exercise over the course of a few workouts (on at least three different days), rather than performing it all at once, to lower injury risk.^[2]

And if you're starting a new workout routine, or upping the intensity of your exercise habits, the guidelines recommend doing so slowly, so muscles have a chance to adapt and for the lowest injury risk.

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Tips for Working Out: Rest and Recovery

Rest and recovery are important parts of every workout plan. Kelsey Wells, a trainer with the workout app Sweat and creator of the PWR weight-training programs, shares her favorite tips for letting your muscles recoup.

There's More Than 1 Way to Let Your Muscles Recover

Workout recovery doesn't just mean lying on the couch and kicking up your feet. The best post-workout recovery means using a variety of strategies to help your muscles heal. Here are some of those strategies:

Passive Recovery A complete cessation from exercise, passive recovery is synonymous with complete rest. (Okay — you can lie on the couch and kick up your feet for this one!) How much passive recovery your body needs depends on multiple factors, including your current fitness level and how intense your workouts are, Kolba says.

Active Recovery Active recovery means low-intensity, generally low-impact exercise that promotes blood flow and tissue repair without further stressing the body, Rivadeneyra says. "If you're feeling fatigued from strength training, engage in a lower intensity cardiovascular bike ride or walk, which enables your body to circulate waste products caused by the rigorous activity," adds Nicole Belkin, MD,

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anything you can do without getting windou or ratigaing your muscles.

Cross-Training Cross-training lets you get the most bang for your workout buck. It means changing up the activity you do from workout to workout, so you are fatiguing different muscles during different workouts, Rivadeneyra says. For example, if you generally spend your workouts running, strength training, or boxing (even if performed at a high intensity) will stress your body in different ways. By allowing certain muscle groups to repair while others work, cross-training helps promote overall muscle health while minimizing the amount of passive and active recovery days needed.

Myofascial Release Myofascial release (sometimes called soft tissue therapy) includes massage and foam rolling. Performed immediately before and after exercise, it may help decrease feelings of delayed onset muscle soreness while speeding muscle recovery.^[3] Myofascial release can be a part of passive and active recovery days as well as cross-training workouts.

Nutritional Recovery The foods you eat provide your body with the building blocks needed to repair muscles and promote recovery, Kolba says. A whole-foods-based diet rich in antioxidants, whole carbohydrates, and lean protein can help trigger the right changes in your body between workouts, so your system is in better shape when it comes time for the next workout.

Sleep "This is a large part of the recovery equation," Rivadeneyra says. During sleep, the body produces the majority of its growth factors and hormones that aid in daily muscle repair and recovery. Getting the recommended seven to nine hours of sleep per night allows those growth factors to do their work, he says. Avoid screen time (TV, phones) and alcohol before bed and keep the room dark to help ensure quality sleep.

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Non-fitness-related stressors — such as poor sleep, relationship troubles, and working overtime — can affect how much rest and what type of recovery a person may need from a given workout, too.

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For example, children, teenagers, and older adults may require more post-workout recovery compared with young and middle-age adults, Rivadeneyra says. People who are out of shape or new to exercise may need more recovery, or even passive recovery, to repair their muscles and rebuild their energy stores.^[4]

However, some fitter individuals may need more recovery because they are regularly exercising at a higher intensity.

The schedule of the average gym-goer who exercises four or five days per week — combining a mix of high-intensity workouts, cross-training routines, and active recovery days — and takes the remaining two or three days off allows for proper recovery, according to Rivadeneyra.

Related: How Much Exercise You Need to Meet Your Health and Fitness Goals

Fitter individuals may be able to use this strategy (alternating between high-intensity workouts, varied activity, and active recovery) six or seven days per week without taking any day completely off.

What's important to remember is that recovery looks different for everyone, Rivadeneyra adds.

"For an elite marathoner, running 4 or 5 miles can be an active recovery workout," he says. "For someone new to running, a 20-minute cycling session would be more appropriate for recovery."

At the same time, no matter what your overall fitness level is, it's also important to pay attention to your individual needs. Even that elite marathon runner who can usually work out seven days per week will likely need a little bit more recovery after, say, running a longer distance than usual, running a particularly hilly course that they're not used to, or completing a race while recovering from a cold.

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That's why it is critical to pay attention to both how you feel and how your body is responding to your workouts. Exercise plateaus (when you can't seem to push yourself harder), mental fatigue, feelings of burnout, and extreme muscle soreness that lasts for more than three or four days are all signs that you need to increase your workout recovery, Leber says.

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