

Top 10 Fitness Mistakes by Jon Gestl

Most fitness goals include weight loss, or the reduction of fat content, in one way or another. Whether we want to lose a couple pounds, change a clothing size, or gain muscle mass, loss and control of our fat content is usually part of the plan.

Just as it is necessary to know what steps to take to meet your individual fitness goals, it is just as important to know what not to do. Avoid the following top ten mistakes that are sure to ruin your fitness efforts:

1. Fail to Plan.

It's been said over and over: "If you fail to plan, you plan to fail." Working out without a pre-determined workout regime is similar to going on a trip without directions; most likely you'll end up getting lost. Don't make this common mistake. Enlist the aid of a qualified personal trainer to design a proper resistance training and aerobic program. Purchase one of the many guides to fitness programming and educate yourself on the basics.

2. Compare yourself to others.

Go into any gym and you're sure to see grunting exercisers muscling their way through workouts. Meanwhile, the group fitness studio is filled with twirling, panting, leaping students who look more like they're auditioning for a music video than participating in an aerobics class. Don't even think about trying to emulate them. At the very least you'll get discouraged that you can't keep up; at the worst you'll get hurt.

Keep your expectations realistic. A beginning expecting to bench 300 pounds in the first month is doomed to failure. Better to increase strength incrementally over time. Likewise, presuming that you'll lose 100 pounds of bodyfat on a new diet in three months will never happen. Set realistic goals that will keep you motivated and concentrate on yourself, not others, throughout the process.

3. Too little exercise.

Contrary to what popular exercise programs would have us believe, it is simply not enough to put in three or four exercise sessions per week and expect major results. Weight loss and body composition changes are results of cumulative lifestyle choices, not just exercise in the gym. There are 168 hours in a week; expecting to lose weight by just spending 1% of our available time being active is ridiculous.

This doesn't mean you need to spend your entire day chained to a barbell, but make sure that you are active in some fashion every day. In addition to workouts, increase lower level activity by walking or bike riding to work, choose the parking space furthest away from the grocery store's door, or get out and play with your kids. The point is to be active and keep the body in motion on a regular basis.

4. Too much exercise.

On the other hand, don't become obsessed with exercise that it begins to rule your life. Over-training is as detrimental to achieving fitness goals as doing nothing at all.

Common signs of over-training include overuse injuries, insomnia, fatigue, prolonged recovery from workouts, and general disinterest in exercise. Rest and recovery are vital for achieving gains and preventing burnout.

5. Never change your workout routine.

Nothing is as boring as the same routine over and over again. Not only will you get bored, your muscles will adapt and quit responding. Change your exercises, the order you do them, the number of sets and reps, and vary the weights. Variety is necessary or progress will stop. Make every workout different in some way.

6. Starving to lose weight.

The usual American diet consists of a quick (usually missed) breakfast, lunch on the run and then a huge feast for dinner. Unfortunately, this is the worst eating plan for weight loss because it slows down the metabolism. When the body is not fed consistently, it flips into starvation mode developed through evolution and hangs onto fat content for survival.

Research supports that the production of thyroid hormones can be negatively affected by repeated bouts of dieting and calorie restriction. Five or six smaller meals spaced evenly from 2.5 to 3 hours make it easier for the body to digest throughout the day and increase metabolism over the long term. It may sound counterintuitive, but in order to burn fat you need to eat. Instead of reducing the amount of meals, care should be taken in controlling portion sizes.

7. Underestimating alcohol consumption.

Just as portion sizes need to be controlled, alcohol consumption must be limited, if not eliminated. Not only does alcohol have calories; it is actually metabolized more like fat than carbohydrates. Unlike fat or carbohydrates, alcohol has no nutritional value whatsoever. Drinking a glass of wine or having that martini may feel good but adds no benefit whatsoever to weight loss and muscle growth. The empty calories of those "liquid lunches" just add up too quick.

8. Relying on fast food.

In the New York Times Bestseller *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal*, Eric Schlosser gives a convincing interpretation of how the rise of the multi-billion dollar fast food industry correlates with what we now see to be epidemic obesity in the U.S. Instead of spending time planning and preparing meals, it is far easier to grab the burger/fry/shake combo or a deluxe pizza on the way home from work.

The problem with regularly eating out is that despite how careful we may think we are, we truly don't know the makeup of most of the food that is being served to us. Even with fast food stores attempting to offer "healthier" choices, preparation of mass-produced meals relies on use of less than optimum ingredients and typically laden in fat. The only way we can be sure of knowing what we are consuming is to prepare food ourselves.

Consuming less processed food is not always the easiest thing to do if we're used to it, but it is a major lifestyle choice that needs to be changed. Besides, is it just a coincidence that we call it "junk food"?

9. Avoiding of weight training.

An important concern for weight loss is increasing the body's metabolism so caloric expenditure is increased throughout the day. As stated above, one way to do this is to make sure that the appropriate number of meals is consumed. Another way is to increase the percentage of muscle mass. The more muscle we carry on our frames, the higher the caloric expenditure required. Weight training is necessary to increase muscle mass.

A common belief among beginning fitness enthusiasts is the need for hours and hours of high intensity aerobic exercise for fat loss. The reality is just the opposite. Aerobic exercise certainly helps to burn fat, but does relatively little to increase overall metabolic rate in comparison with muscular gain due to a consistent resistance training program. A concern for increasing muscle mass is imperative for successful loss of fat content.

10. Looking for the "easy way out."

Whether it's winning the lottery or having the perfect body, we all want something for nothing. One look at late-night infomercials and you can see all the bogus advertisements that promise weight loss by either popping a pill, drinking a shake, or buying some revolutionary new piece of equipment. Even factions of the medical community have jumped on the bandwagon in recent years, promising the body of our dreams through a variety of surgical procedures.

The main concept of weight loss, calories in vs. calories out, is simple but far from easy. Only with dedication, work, and healthy lifestyle changes are results going to happen. And FORGET the quick fixes. They don't exist. Cher said it best in a fitness commercial back in the 80's: "If it came in a bottle, we'd all have a beautiful body."