

A close-up photograph of a woman with blonde hair tied back, wearing a blue tank top. She is looking down with a focused expression as she lifts a black dumbbell. The background is dark and blurred, suggesting a gym setting. The text "Hit the GYM" is overlaid on the right side of the image.

Hit the  
GYM

# Importance of Exercise

Exercising is usually thought of as a way to remain fit, but there's a broad range of benefits beyond that, including better health, a reduction in stress and mood enhancements.

Our busy lives can make it difficult to get to the gym, but it remains one of the most important things you can do in terms of self care.

## GETTING STARTED

If you've settled into a more sedentary lifestyle, it's critical not to overdo it when beginning a new exercise program. There's a period of adjustment, both in terms of determining the right schedule and in finding the right duration and limits for your routine. Overdo it, particularly early on, and you might risk becoming overwhelmed and end up right back on the couch where you started.

Begin with a regimen that takes into account other responsibilities. Eventually, you could settle on a full hour each day, or perhaps more, depending on your personal parameters. Adding time in small intervals smooths the transition, and keeps new gym members from wearing down early on.

Make sure you exercise three to five times a week for



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maximum positive impacts.

No matter the approach, give yourself some down time for recovery. Also, remember that these daily goals — whether it's a half hour, an hour or more — don't have to happen all at once. Breaking exercise routines into smaller chunks can help you stay on the right track when other duties call.

## YOUR PATH TO WELL BEING

Physical activity unlocks the secrets to better living in so many ways, from stress reduction to cardiovascular health. The American Heart Association recommends some 150 minutes of moderately intense aerobic activity per week, a goal that's easily achieved with the right kind

of regimen at your local gym.

Regular workouts provide opportunities for reflection and problem-solving, while exercise also releases endorphins — a group of neurotransmitters that make us feel good.

In both cases, significant stress reduction can follow. Visits to the gym can also increase self confidence, help

you wind down and relax, improve your mood and address a mild sense of depression, according to the Mayo Clinic.

Think of it almost like motion-based meditation. A trip to the gym takes your mind off the distractions and irritations of the day, while giving you a chance to set and achieve regular goals.

# What to Look for in a Gym

Gyms aren't all created equal. Depending on what your needs are, finding the right one can be a challenge.

Some larger gyms are also adding features that heretofore weren't considered part and parcel of the average experience, from basketball courts to swimming pools. You may be looking for child care to make scheduling time to exercise easier, while others could choose the personal attention of an in-house trainer. In the end, however, there are several far more mundane things that make or break the average gym experience.

## LOCATION AND HOURS

You might come in thinking about amenities, but if the prospective gym isn't open when you're available or presents too much of a travel challenge, it's going to make sticking to a regimen very difficult. The straight-forward issue of where it is and when it's open can often be the principal contributing factor in whether a gym membership is worth it.

Many busy people are more likely to go if a gym is open early or late, when they're already commuting to and from work or school. Look for gyms that are near where you spend those critical working hours — or, even better, along the route you already take to



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those places. Also, keep in mind that your schedule may require working out in the morning on one day and an evening session the next. Make sure your gym is flexible enough to accommodate those needs.

## ATMOSPHERE AND FEEL

Exercising can be a completely different experience,

depending on how you approach it. Is there a hard-charging atmosphere when you're looking for a lighter workout or vice versa? Making sure the place is kept clean has never been more important, of course, but it's also a critical part of enjoying time spent among perspiring fellow exercisers. Remember too that how comfortable you get

with some of a gym's special features might come down to feel. Try out that treadmill or the stationary bikes. Confirm that they're comfortable and fit your frame.

## COST AND LENGTH OF CONTRACT

Read the contract. Is it a monthly agreement, and for how long? Can you go month-

to-month? Is there a trial period? Visit more than one gym to see which of those agreements is available, and decide on a personal commitment that works for you. Keep an eye out for specials. Some gyms will also negotiate with prospective new members, so you might be able to leverage sessions with a trainer or even a special class or two.

# Coming Back from Injury

Nobody likes being sidelined with injury. Unfortunately, coming back too soon isn't usually the best idea.

You can lengthen recovery time, or even worsen an injury. But when's the best time? Slight pain can be pushed through, sometimes to a healthy benefit. But anything more than that means you're not there yet. Never return to the gym when there's still excessive pain or swelling, and not typically until stiffness has dramatically improved. Any subsequent comeback should follow these recommended steps.

## FIRST, CHECK WITH A PRO

The best person to determine if you're really ready to return is a personal physician or physical therapist. The fact is, you might not be — even if your heart is saying otherwise. They can give you specifics on how far you've come, and what (if anything) you still need to accomplish before you're back at full strength.

For instance, therapists teach injured gym members specific activities meant to strengthen injured areas, so they are intimately familiar with their progress. Doctors have in-depth knowledge on the history of swelling, and can monitor unseen injury through scans.



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## TAKE IT EASY

Whatever the regimen, start slow. If you used to run five miles a day on the treadmill, begin at 50% of your typical level or less. Increase only 10 or 15% each week, provided there are no setbacks. It might be smart to begin by jogging or even walking, rath-

er than running. Watch carefully for swelling or excessive soreness during or after each trip to the gym. Those are warning signs that you might need to recalibrate.

## CONSIDER A TRAINER

One of the best ways to avoid an injury is also one of

the best ways to come back from one: Work with a professional trainer. People tend to focus on their work designing programs that help with a variety of healthy goals, while limiting the risk of hurting yourself.

If an injury has already happened, however, trainers

can then develop a plan that ensures you don't do additional damage while on the path to recovery. They can also assist those who suffer from conditions like heart disease, diabetes, arthritis or hypertension, making sure routines doesn't create additional stress points.

# Safety at the Gym

Many of the benefits of going to the gym are well known, but it's also important to avoid injuries while exercising.

Following important safety measures — some of them even before you begin your routine — can help ensure that you enjoy all of the positive health aspects without suffering debilitating set backs, or worse. Here's a look.

## ASK YOUR DOCTOR

Anyone with pre-existing health issues should consult a physician before starting any intense health routine — in particular those who suffer from respiratory conditions like asthma or are battling heart disease. Other areas of concern include diabetes, elevated blood pressure, issues with the bones or joints, and neurological conditions.

Only a doctor familiar with your health care journey can weigh these particular risks against the questions of how and how long to exercise. In some cases, strenuous exercise regiments at the gym can actually make these conditions worse — leaving you, ironically enough, at greater risk for illness or injury.

Even after you've been cleared, pay attention to what your body is telling you: If you experience chest pains, dizziness, shortness of breath or any other unusual symptom



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when working out, immediately discontinue and consult your physician.

## MANAGING PAIN

It's easy to get excited about a new routine, or simply to be too ambitious, and end up injuring yourself at the gym. Unfortunately, the implica-

tions can be more serious than sore muscles and joints. Push yourself too fast or too far, and you risk stress fractures, or tendon and ligament damage. Continuing to over-exert in an effort to push past initial pain can lead to even bigger problems. Overuse today can also lead to the kind

of wear and tear that causes chronic problems down the road.

## PACE FOR BEST RESULTS

Who doesn't enter the gym ready to take on the world? Starting too fast not only risks injury, however, but also lessens the positive impacts of

your routine. Warm up before you start, since failure to do so can increase your risk of injury or strains. Then set SMART goals — that is, specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and time-limited goals — then write them down, and stick to them. The emphasis, as it relates to safety, is attainability.

# Staying Hydrated

As many as 75% of Americans may be functioning in a state of chronic dehydration, according to medical experts — and the negative impacts can be particularly damaging for those who are exercising.

We've become inundated with buzzy beverage alternatives that make drinking water seem a tad old fashioned. But dehydration is a serious situation, and water remains one of the essential requirements for our bodies to function properly — in particular at the gym. Here are some tips for staying hydrated.

## WHY IT'S IMPORTANT

The human body is mostly water, but it needs to be replenished constantly because of natural every-day processes like urination and breathing. Perspiration is the principal concern at the gym, where those exercising can lose a critical amount of water during their every-day routines. The basic rule for hydration is 8x8, meaning eight glasses filled with eight ounces of water per day, but regular gym patrons will need more. Listen to your body while you're working out. Water carries critical oxygen



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and nutrients throughout our system, while helping to flush waste from our bodies. If you're not getting enough, the results can be catastrophic.

## BRING WATER WITH YOU

Everyone should carry a water bottle with them, wherever they go. This makes achieving — or even exceed-

ing — the traditional 8x8 recommendation far easier. It's particularly important at the gym, where dehydration can lead to muscle fatigue, spikes

in body temperature that cause overheating, and issues with mental function including fainting or dizziness. Bring properly hydrated is also critical to limiting soreness, improving endurance, reducing muscle injuries and even aids with weight loss.

## MIX IT UP

With so many new alternatives, water might sound (and more importantly taste) pretty boring. But there have always been plenty of flavor options that can completely transform that familiar glass of H<sub>2</sub>O. Avoid store-bought flavorings, which can be loaded with unhealthy ingredients. Opt instead for natural enhancers, including slices of watermelon or cucumbers. Sprigs of mint also provide a healthy jolt. If you're a cola fan who's trying to drink healthier, consider trying sparkling water. It has the fizzy kick of a soda, but without the artificial flavors and unneeded sugars.

## WATER ISN'T ALWAYS ENOUGH

As important and undeniably healthy as water consumption is, sometimes it's just not enough: If you exercise for more than an hour, you may need a drink that proves electrolyte replacement to restore potassium and sodium being lost through increased levels of perspiration. Be careful to look for light versions of these drinks, to avoid excess caloric intake.

# Do I Need a Trainer?

Sometimes finding advanced success at the gym requires more expertise, and that's where trainers come in.

They can also play a key role in motivating exercisers. Trial offers to get started with these professionals are sometimes offered, followed by a deeper commitment for regular sessions. Together, you can achieve fitness goals more effectively and often on a shorter timeline. Here's a more in-depth look at what the right training partner can provide.

## MEETING GOALS

Gym members, in particular new ones, typically have a goal or set of goals that follow certain general guidelines: They may want to tone or build specific muscle groups, decrease pain in the back or joints, improve posture, increase flexibility or pump up their metabolism. Trainers can develop a specific program to help accomplish those goals in a more targeted way, saving time and money. They also have valuable experience in creating a routine for warm ups and cool-down periods to help reduce injury — a key element to exercising that many either don't know enough about or wrongly disregard.

## HELPING WITH INTENSITY

Even a seasoned gym mem-



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ber can end up wasting time on routines that don't help achieve their larger aims. Trainers make sure every action leads directly to the desired reaction. They also play a critical role in keeping gym members on track. Starting an exercise regimen is much easier than sticking with it. Trainers are tasked with making sure exercisers

are focused and moving forward — even when work, family and other responsibilities make it difficult to stay on track. If you've ended up quitting after starting a prior workout, it's likely to happen again. Trainers provide a critical back stop. And as they push you, you'll be getting the most of your scheduled workout.

## BUILDING CONSISTENCY

Amateur exercisers often struggle with following the basic strategies that lead to the best result, or even getting to the gym on a regular basis. Trainers add another layer of motivation to exercise, and they also hold gym members accountable to the agreed-upon regimen. They help maximize busy patrons' workouts,

too. Most people these days have a very limited amount of time to exercise. Trainers make sure not a moment is wasted by focusing on the most efficient routines. The best trainers even work to better position exercisers on the days when they're not in the gym, discussing things like sleep patterns and eating habits.

# Staying Safe at the Gym

There have always been traditional worries about germs at the gym. More than a year into the pandemic, however, concerns about exercising indoors revolve around COVID-19.

Fully vaccinated exercisers, who are usually shielded from the worst of the virus' impacts, may still want to wear a mask in order to protect other vulnerable patrons. In some gyms, it's a requirement meant to stop the spread of respiratory droplets, small airborne particles called "aerosols" released when we talk, sneeze, breathe or cough. Here are some additional ways to protect everyone's health during the ongoing outbreak while still maintaining an active exercise routine.

## **DON'T GO DURING PEAK HOURS**

Social distancing is an important tool in the fight against COVID, since this infection spreads person to person through droplets that are breathed in. Exercising when fewer people are in the gym helps reduce the chances that you're near someone who is perhaps unknowingly infected. If you're not familiar with the gym's peak hours, a phone call to their staff can typically help. Some apps also



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track this information.

## **AVOID CROWDED EQUIPMENT**

The CDC has long recommended staying six feet or more apart to limit exposure to COVID-19. That can be difficult to achieve when everyone is crowded around a favorite piece of equipment. Gyms

have increased disinfectant efforts, but there's not much they can do if everyone gathers near the stationary bikes. That kind of behavior is particularly worrisome with gyms, which didn't originally create the same kind of super-spreader events as churches and bars because people don't closely socialize while going through

their routines. Continue wiping down any equipment you use, including treadmills, barbells and ellipticals. Consider using hand sanitizer throughout the workout.

## **DON'T TOUCH YOUR FACE**

Keep your hands away from your eyes, nose and mouth. As

with the flu or common cold, these are primary entry points for respiratory viruses — a family that includes the coronavirus. And of course, stay home if you're feeling sick, even if you're vaccinated. Even those with mild symptoms can place others at risk for developing a life-threatening case of the coronavirus.