

Hit the GYM



Setting Fitness Goals

When setting fitness goals, no single plan is right for everyone. It's important to take a personalized approach to better health, setting both near-term and long-term targets.

Anyone can benefit from more time spent in the gym. When combined with a healthy diet and other wellness objectives, becoming more active can lead to a happier, longer life. But setting fitness goals also comes down to being realistic about how and what you'll be doing.

Be honest with yourself about the time you can allot, so that you don't initially overwork yourself or become disenchanted when you can't keep up an over-scheduled regimen. Here's how to strike just the right balance on your way to better health.



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IN THE SHORT-TERM

The National Institutes of Health recommend creating a list of both short-term and long-term objectives. For those who are completely new to the gym, these initial goals shouldn't jump straight into the number of miles walked on a treadmill, or repetitions in the weight area. Begin with purchasing shoes and workout clothes, selecting a gym that fits your pace and needs, per-

haps signing up for a fitness course. Then you can join those who are already active in creating an initial set of guidelines for where you'd like to go.

IN THE LONG-TERM

Begin with one-week or two-week goals, and then build toward a six-month plan for progress. Meeting and

then exceeding these initial objectives sets you up for longer-term success as your confidence grows. Challenge yourself to continue improving, whether that's walking, jogging or rowing further or getting more reps in with a barbell. Continue to make these goals both measurable and achievable. You won't be doing yourself the most good

by pushing too hard too soon, and failure can lead to quitting for the disappointed.

REVISITING LATER

Try new workouts, once you've mastered the first ones. Track your progress, and continually revisit your original goals. Over time, the definition of success becomes more flexible. After all, you may be

lifting 250 pounds by now, but the future goal probably isn't 750. At some point, the gains become smaller, and so a new goal might revolve around maintenance. You may pick a certain personal weight, or a set number of miles per week or month. If you feel like you've hit a wall, consider connecting with a personal trainer.

Understanding Gym Benefits

There's usually more to a gym membership than immediately meets the eye. If you're like most people, you often don't take full advantage of this investment in our health.

Memberships typically include things you don't have at home, like exercise machines and weights. They also keep you from many of the distractions you'd find back in your own living room. But there's usually more to a gym than first meets the eye.

Dig deeper and you might discover other things that add huge value.

INCLUDED OPTIONS

Ask about additional included supplies or equipment, since some gyms provide or loan out things like rackets and balls, mats and rollers, swim caps, spin shoes and boxing gloves. In some cases, that may allow you to try out a new activity without having to hand over any up-front money. Many gyms offer fitness or yoga programs, as well as motivational and educational courses to help you achieve your health and wellness goals.

Boot camps, and weight-loss and pedometer challenges are attractive for those who are



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more prone to remaining active when they are in a group setting. The programs may also include personal advice from a dietitian or personal trainer. Watch for bring-a-friend promotions, where they get in free while you enjoy some company at the gym.

AWAY FROM THE GYM

More and more gyms are offering webinars or other

online programming that focuses on exercise, health and nutrition. Membership perks may also include discounts or group rates at local health food stores, supplement stores and fitness apparel outlets. Sign up to find out more about any social events, like healthy cookouts, sponsored walks or runs and family pool days. Creating a sense of community can only strengthen your

resolve to get and stay fit.

CHARGED SERVICES

Some of these programs, as well as classes focusing on things like martial arts or message therapy, may include a small fee at your gym. But having access to them at the time and place where you've already set aside a block of time to exercise is a convenience worth paying for. Some

gyms are also offering fee-based blood testing, where you can find more about lipids, enzymes, vitamin deficiencies and blood count in order to better design your diet and exercise plan. On-site professionals may also be able to provide expert advice on your regimen or potential supplements that improve your health during a pre-set appointment schedule.

Smart Cardio Tips

The best, most well-rounded workouts will have your heart pumping. Get the most out of exercising by involving your entire body, not just targeted muscle groups.

The larger goal is right there in the name, which is an abbreviation for cardiovascular. As large muscles in your arms, torso and legs move faster, your pulse and breathing increases, maximizing the health benefits as you get stronger.

GETTING STARTED

Those who are new to cardio should start slowly. Build a low- or moderate-intensity routine that can be performed without overheating for a long period of time. Even at the beginner's stage, you'll be strengthening your muscles and heart, burning calories and controlling your appetite, reducing general soreness and some arthritis symptoms, addressing heart disease and high-blood pressure concerns and increasing your endurance and stamina.

Some of the best options include walking, swimming, bicycling, golfing, dancing and water-based exercises. Keep in mind that intense cardio activity need not last a



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long time. Studies have shown that interval workouts as short as 5-10 minutes are better at increasing your aerobic capacity than some forms of endurance training. If you're starting, or beginning again after injury, consult your doctor since they may have targeted advice on how to protect yourself from re-injury.

PRE-WORKOUT ROUTINE

As you move further along

on your wellness journey, step up to more involving cardio activities like kayaking, martial arts or skating. You'll also want to create new cardio challenges, whether that's increasing the incline, or taking advantage of the stop-and-go nature of interval workouts. Just remember to begin every time with a series of needed stretches and then a warmup. Ease into these activities with a few minutes of

lighter exercises to rev up your body before getting into the more difficult portions of your routine. For instance, you should walk before you run. Stretching helps prevent injury.

COOLING DOWN

Cooling down after your workout is almost as important as stretching before. You want to create a safe offramp

so your heart rate and breathing can return safely to normal. Those who are jogging or running shouldn't just come to an abrupt stop. It's better to take another lap or two to allow your cardiovascular system to readjust. Bring bottled water along so that you can properly hydrate before your routine, while you're exercising, and then during this needed final period.

Should You Take A Gym Class?

Working out with others can serve as a big motivational tool. They can help you push yourself to meet new goals, while serving as a great sounding board.

You'll learn more than Zumba, spinning or yoga. Signing up for classes at the gym creates an instant friend group where you can discover new pathways to good health, share tips and stories about your journey, and create a lasting sense of camaraderie.

Here are a few of the most popular options.

DANCE-LIKE OFFERINGS

Looking for a fun, high-energy experience? Sign up for Zumba or other dance-like offerings that are designed to get gym members moving and grooving. They're great for those looking for a cardio workout. You'll work a broad spectrum of muscle groups, without risking boredom because you've fallen into the same old routine. Batuka blends dancing to Latin rhythms with aerobics to offer an entire-body workout. Belly dancing has also made something of a comeback, as it offers a fitness path for those at most any skill or physical level, while still offering cardio and core-strength benefits.



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STRENGTH TRAINING

The mistake most people make with weight lifting is focusing too much on certain areas, like biceps or shoulders, to the exclusion of others. That's why many gyms are offering total-body classes that include strength training across the entire range, from bars and weights to core and

squats. Strength-training courses are also critically important for beginners, or those who want to work on their weight-lifting form since an instructor is there to guide members along. For the more advanced, look into various boot camps where gyms offer military-style circuit training to create fitness challenges.

OTHER CLASSES

Spin classes will get your heart rate up while also being much easier on the joints. You'll exercise on a stationary bike with music and an instructor to provide special motivation. Depending on the class, you'll simulate rides up steep hills and winding roads or on furious sprints. Pilates and yoga classes tend to focus more on

flexibility, muscle toning and stretching. They are great places to start for beginner-level gym members, and for those who are recovering from injury or looking to down shift from a difficult exercise regimen. Just remember to ask detailed questions about the type and intensity of these classes, since some versions are more physically demanding than others.

Inspiring New Workouts

Bored with your worn-out routine? There have never been more ways to get in shape.

If you've been a gym member long enough, you've probably already tried spinning and Zumba. Yoga and pilates, too. Don't fret, because there's a new generation of exercise instructors mixing and matching styles to create something unlike anything that came before.

Here's are a few of the newer trends in exercise.

ANIMAL FLOW

Designer Mike Fitch's combination exercise/dance workout was named after its primal positions, which are held close to the ground and include handstands, crab walking and crawling. They're combined with choreography based on gymnastics, Parkour, acrobatics and breakdancing in order to work multiple muscle groups all at once. The program promises improved power, mobility, flexibility and coordination.

POUND

Former drummers Kirsten Potenza and Cristina Peerenboom aimed to harness the fun found in making music in order to burn calories and sculpt bodies when creating Pound. Exercisers employ a pair of weighted drum sticks (stylized as



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“Ripstix”) to play along with booming beats, with a promise to burn as many as 900 calories every 45 minutes. The workout DVD and Ripstix are also available for sale for anyone whose gym doesn't offer Pound, or for those who prefer a solo-exercise regimen.

BOKWA

Founder Paul Mavi wanted

to create a South African dance-based exercise routine that anyone could participate in — even non-dancers. The result was Bokwa, which allows exercisers to follow along on a step map featuring the shape of a familiar number or letter. Basic moves include 1, L and 3, which you follow to the rhythms of high-energy music. Since the routine is so

streamlined, many classes even allow members to add their own moves and personal style as you go.

GROOVE

Those looking for even less structure will love Body Groove, which is only based on the loose guidance of dancer Misty Tripoli. For instance, she'll regularly encourage par-

ticipants to kick when they want to, without necessarily having to follow along when she kicks. The results are completely adaptable and never the same, since Tripoli wants everyone to make their own unique contributions to the routine. That kind of personalization also makes Groove suitable for those at any level from beginner to veteran dancer.

Stay Active Year-Round

As the warm months end, it can become more difficult to find motivation. Don't let these shorter days turn into an excuse to slow or stop your exercise regimen.

The investments you've made all year in a gym membership in order to become more fit are at risk if you suddenly vanish as winter sets in.

MAINTAIN A ROUTINE

Reduced daylight associated with the fall and winter can have a direct impact on people's healthy habits. Darkness may lessen your motivation to go to the gym. You might also start eating more, especially around the holidays. Both can lead to negative health outcomes, in particular as putting off exercise until tomorrow might inevitably lead to longer and longer periods of inactivity. Stick to your regular routine, despite these distractions, while maintaining a vitamin-rich diet and getting plenty of sleep. You'll be on a path to wellness, while a gym membership keeps you out of the harsh elements.

TURN TO A PRO

If you find yourself in an extended struggle with motivation or excitement, consider contacting a personal trainer or health coach. They can provide a sense of encouragement



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and accountability that will help through the changing seasons. Some gyms also have nutritionists or registered dietitians who can address poor eating habits while creating a personalized plan. Just remember, in any of these cases, to ask about experience and certification. Discuss any major changes with your doctor. Still

feeling gloomy? Something as simple as a gym-based class may help break the log jam by putting you in direct contact with others who are on a similar journey toward health and happiness.

CONSIDER YOUR HEALTH

For some, changes in the weather bring on seasonal

affective disorder. This type of depression happens in late fall and can last into the spring, but is treatable with various therapies and targeted medication. Some of SAD's main symptoms include low energy, social withdrawal and losing interest in activities that were once enjoyed, according to the National

Institute of Mental Health — so that might be what's keeping you from the gym. The young are more apt to suffer seasonal affective disorder than elderly people, and women are more likely than men to have it. If you think you might be suffering from this form of depression, talk to your doctor.

Maximizing Your Workout

Focused attention is critical to getting the most out of your gym experience. The best personalized health regimen will deal first and foremost with a few key areas.

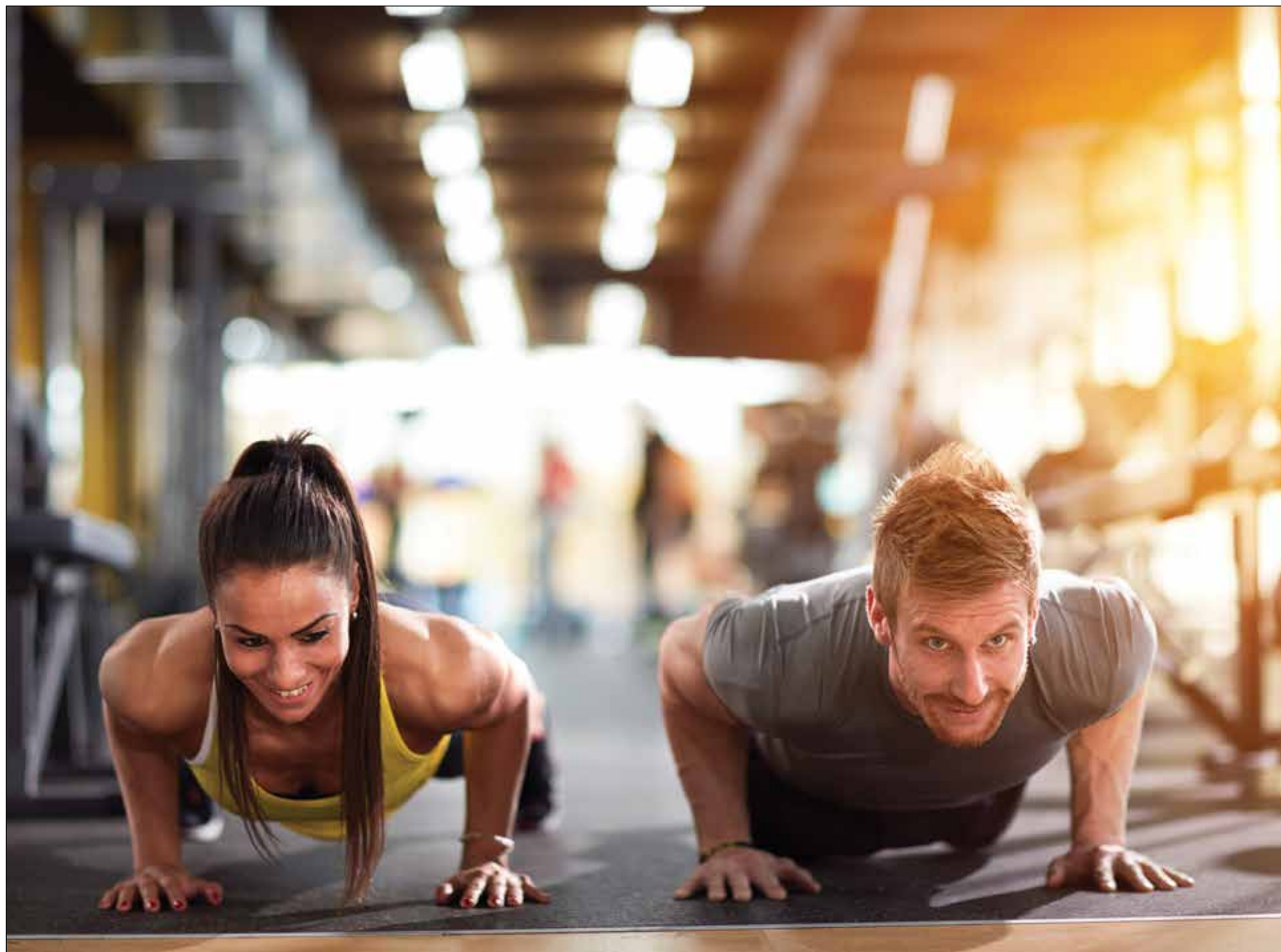
Consider them the building blocks for the best workout. Just remember to consult your doctor before beginning any new routine. Listening to your body is also critical, since pain or other difficulties are a sign that you should pull back or stop all together. If you're unsure about form for any of these exercises, have a conversation with a pro at the gym.

SQUATS

These simple exercises tone muscles, particularly in the thighs and glutes, while burning lots of calories. Squats also tone your calves, abs and hamstrings. Begin by using just your own body weight, and then add a shoulder bar or free weights to increase resistance. Don't let your knees extend beyond your own toes, and keep your back straight.

PUSHUPS

Get on your hands and toes, with your back straight, then raise and lower yourself to work biceps, deltoids, triceps, abs, pecs and glutes. As you become stronger, consider lifting an arm or leg off the ground. You can also put your



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feet on an exercise ball or bench. For less intensity, do pushups with your knees on the ground instead of your toes.

PLANKS

This is a related exercise, since you begin in a traditional push-up position. Place your arms and feet hip length apart,

with your back straight, and hold the position for set periods of time. Difficulty levels can be increased by holding for longer, or lifting an arm or leg.

WEIGHT LIFTING

Whether using your gym's free weights or dead lifting with a bar, lifting will do a

great job of targeting your arms, back, legs and rear end. Form is critical to avoid sprains or other injury: Stand with your feet slightly wider than your shoulders, and keep your back straight.

WHILE YOU'RE THERE

Some parts of getting the most out of your work out are

about function. Other things are more about form: Try listening to music, instead of mindlessly watching whatever is on the gym's television. Instead of the same old stretching routine, join a class to get warmed up. Switch to interval routines to keep things interesting. And don't forget to drink lots of water.