

Common Exercise Mistakes*

Time Out

Two things stand out right away as problems in the gym... lack of time and just going through the motions. Lack of time is the number one excuse people give for not working out so why waste effort on exercises that don't deliver or cause harm? Additionally, people often believe that what they learned in high school P.E. is sufficient to get them through their workouts. Sadly, this is what causes the majority of injuries and yields poor results. Here are some tips on moves and techniques that should be banished from your workout for wasting time or putting you at risk for injuries.

The Seated Leg Extension – Displeased Knees

Lifting extra heavy weights with just your thighs is a recipe for injury, referring to the leg extension machine which isolates the muscles in the front of the thighs known as the quadriceps. Besides straining knee ligaments, this exercise can overdevelop the quads, making the back of thigh muscles (hamstrings) more likely to snap, especially if they're tight and weak in comparison.



Physiologists determined that leg extensions place significantly more stress on your knees than squats. Why? Because the resistance is placed near your ankles, which leads to high amounts of torque being applied to your knee joint every time you lower the weight. What's more, scientists found that people who squat long-term have tighter, stronger knee ligaments than those who don't squat at all.

Instead, stick to squat-and-lunge type moves. Free weight squats, split squats, and lunges performed with perfect form are all better choices for working your quads and protecting your knees.

The Behind-the-Neck Lat Pull-Down – Pain in the Neck

Unless your shoulders are super flexible, any exercise where you push or pull a bar that's positioned behind your neck can damage the delicate rotator muscles leading to chronic shoulder, upper back and neck pain. When using the pull down machine at the gym to sculpt your back, sit up straight and pull the bar down to your chest. Just pull the bar in front of your head, down to your collarbone. You'll work your back just as hard, but with less risk for injury.



Unless you have very flexible shoulders, this exercise is difficult to do correctly, and can increase your risk for shoulder impingement syndrome — a painful condition in which the muscles or tendons of your rotator cuff become entrapped in your shoulder joint.

Not So Fast

Some exercisers set their cardio machines to slow for each and every workout under the mistaken belief that moving at a snail's pace burns more fat. The truth is varying your pace and intensity is a far more successful weight loss strategy. The best way to burn calories is by mixing fast and slow speeds and this is also the best way to address the body's different energy systems and muscle groups.



Cardio Clutch

Hunching over a treadmill, stair climber or stationery bike with a death grip on the handrails is not only ineffective, it's also dangerous. Better to go at a slower speed with proper form without relying on the equipment to keep you upright.

Ab-solute No No

Locking your feet under the couch to do your sit ups may seem like a good idea but in fact, it's more likely to destroy your lower back than flatten your belly. Besides, anchoring your feet kicks all the work into the hips meaning the abs get far less of a workout than if you did the following move: lie on your back with your feet placed flat on the floor, extend your arms and slowly roll up to a sitting position one vertebrae at a time; keep breathing as you move.



Also, if you're doing thousands of crunches every day to minimize the belly bulge, you won't see visible results unless you lose the fat first! Cardiovascular exercise is the best way to burn calories. Add resistance training to the mix and you'll give your metabolism a boost too. Then, you can focus on getting a six-pack.

The Seated Hip Abductor Machine – Double Trouble

You can definitely skip the inner and outer thigh machines because they work such a small patch of muscle and because the movements are so unnatural. Because you're seated, it trains a movement that has no functional use. And if done with excessive weight and jerky technique, it can put undue pressure on your spine.



Instead, work the same muscles, but while standing. you'll get much better results with moves like holding a weighted ball as you do basic squats, lunges and side squats. Or simply loop a resistance band around both legs, and position the band just below your knees. Now take small steps to your left for 20 feet. Then side-step back to your right for 20 feet. That's one set. This is much harder than it sounds, but you can do it anywhere, and it's also a great warm-up for any sport.

The Seated Rotation Machine – Waist of Time

Waist twists and side bends do not whittle your waist and, if done too often or with too much weight, may actually bulk up your middle. Doing them too vigorously can lead to a low-back attack as well.

It works the muscles under your love handles, but will do little to reduce the fat that covers them. What's more, because your pelvis doesn't move as you rotate your upper body, this exercise can put excessive twisting forces on the spine.



Alternatively, you can use rotational exercises to work your obliques. But here's the secret to safety: before you do any rotational exercises, brace your abs forcefully -- as if you're about to be punched in the gut -- and hold them that way as you do the movement. This limits your range of motion and helps to keep you from rotating excessively at your lower spine. Or hold a weighted ball (2 to 4 pounds) at chest level, plant your feet firmly, tighten your abs and slowly rotate from side to side, 8 to 15 times.

The Smith Machine – Squat Nots

Squats are the king of lower body toners but go too deep and watch out for pain in your knees, hips and lower back. Your knees especially take a beating from this bad technique due to overstretched ligaments and increased pressure on the joint.

The Smith machine — which looks like a squat rack with a built-in bar that runs on guides — is supposed to give you all the benefits of squats, but none of the risk that comes from holding a heavy barbell across your back. That's because the bar can easily be secured at any point during the movement. Because the bar runs on guides, you can only move straight up and down as you squat — instead of down and back, as you would in a free-weight squat. The result: An unnatural movement that puts extra stress on your knees and lower back. Need another reason to skip the Smith? Researchers found that traditional squats produced almost 50 percent more muscle activity in the quadriceps than squats done on a Smith machine.



When you do any type of squat variation, be warned against lowering any further than thighs parallel to the floor. Make sure your heels stay firmly planted and your knees are in line with your toes. If you're not comfortable with barbell squats, simply do the exercise while holding dumbbells at arm's length next to your sides. You won't need a spotter, and your body will be free to move through the natural motion of the squat.

Bad Bend

Flopping forward to touch your toes is yet another invitation to back pain, especially if you do it quickly and with fully straightened knees. If you're prone to lower back issues, steer clear of this move altogether. However, those with no back problems who do this stretch slowly and with softened knees get a decent stretch through the back of the thighs and lower spine.



Biceps Only?

The bicep curl is the first upper body exercise that most people perform, yet it's the smallest upper body muscle there is. No one is suggesting that you neglect your biceps altogether, but if you want to maximize your gym time, focus on exercises that create total body functionality by building muscles in your back, core, chest, legs and shoulders.



The Pec Deck – Not So Fly

This apparatus, also called the chest fly machine, can overstretch the front of your shoulder and cause the muscles around the rear of your shoulder to stiffen. The result: Doing this movement frequently can lead to shoulder impingement syndrome.

Forget the machine and stick with exercises such as the pushup, dumbbell bench press and dumbbell incline press; they're easier on your shoulders and the best way to build your chest overall. In fact, researchers found that pectoral muscles are activated for 23 percent less time during the chest fly, compared with the bench press.



Underdone or Overdone

Doing up to 100 repetitions per set? Not a good idea. Using a weight so light you can keep pumping for minutes at a time without breaking a sweat won't do much for you in the way of building strength or shaping muscles, and the idea that this strategy will help you avoid bulking up is a myth. Use a weight that's heavy enough so that your muscles feel completely worked by the end of a set of 8 to 15 repetitions yet still allows you to maintain good form.

On the other hand, lifting too much weight can injure muscles and create incorrect alignment of the spine, bones, and muscles. One of the biggest offenders is the seated cable row, an exercise where the person sits on a bench and pulls a handle attached to a low pulley toward their midsection. A large percentage of people bob back and forth using their unprotected lower back as the work horse. The problem here is they're using momentum to carry them through the exercise instead of a properly aligned spine and strong core muscles.



Routine, Routine

We are all creatures of habit. If you're working out to maintain the status quo or for stress relief, great! But if you want to lose weight or get leaner, you need to change things up for your body now and then — run longer, cycle faster, climb higher. And proper form is a must. Use a personal trainer or other qualified person to check your form once in a while (including cardio machines).

*Adapted from "Exercise No-No's" by Liz Neporent with Ralf Hennig (<http://body.aol.com/fitness/bad-exercises>), "Bad Exercise Techniques: Need to Know" by Amy Paturel, with Jason Parsons, (<http://body.aol.com/fitness/basics/bad-exercise-technique>), and "Six Exercises You Shouldn't Do" (<http://www.aolhealth.com/diet/men-fitness/avoid-injuries>).