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Exercising smarter

5 must-dos to avoid workout injuries



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Do it right, and exercise is great for your body; better health, more energy, more focus. But do it wrong and you could find yourself out of action. Muscles, joints, backs, hearts... they can all feel the pinch of a badly controlled bend or an overly ambitious cardio-funk session. But fear not, here are the 5 essentials for keeping your engine and chassis going strong during your workout.

1. Set realistic goals



It sounds simple, but it can be the hardest tip to master. Whether you're a first time exerciser or a former athlete strapping on the shoes again, one of the main reasons people injure themselves exercising is that they want too much too soon. It's human nature! But you can't drop a dress size or run a marathon overnight, so before you get too carried away set some smaller, more realistic goals and you'll be less likely to overreach and more likely to hit them (which feels great by the way). For some help setting goals see our Secret to Setting Smart Health Goals.

2. Warm up

We all know we should, right? Get the muscles warm, the joints moving and the mind ready. So no matter what that impatient voice in your head says, take the time to warm up! The increased muscle and joint temperature will improve elasticity and range of motion, making 'strains' less likely (think cooked vs raw spaghetti). The gentle rise in your heart rate will make it less of a shock when you start exercising. And don't underestimate the value of preparing your mind for exercise – it could be the difference between that controlled step and the clumsy one. Plus there's a whole host of other changes that will help you perform better. For most people five minutes of light activity like walking, jogging on the spot and shoulder rolls is a good warm up.

3. Gradual increases



When it comes to exercise, progress is your friend. Increasing the time, weight or intensity of exercise over time is the trick to ensuring you continue to see the benefits and hit your goals. BUT... and it's a big but... if you up the ante too much, too fast, there's a chance you'll injure yourself. It might be something obvious, or it could be a more subtle injury that gets worse over time. Either way, you won't be doing much exercise, so when it comes to adding those extra minutes, kilometres and kilograms to your activity, listen to your body and be kind to it.

4. Fed and watered



The right food and hydration before exercise can make a big difference to your performance, but what do they have to do with getting injured? Well, glad you asked. Many exercise-related injuries happen when your technique or concentration go out the window, and key to your technique and concentration is maintaining your energy levels. While you don't want to exercise after a buffet, a small meal and some water beforehand can be ideal. Everyone is different, but most people can handle their last main meal 2-4 hours before exercise without any stomach upset. A snack 1-2 hours before also works for some people. It's a good idea to sip water leading up to your exercise instead of gulping it down just before you start. For more info, watch the 60-second 'What should I eat when exercising?' explainer.

5. Warm down/stretching



Time for the ice bath. Just kidding. But it is important to take the warm down/cool down seriously. Not only does it stop the blood from pooling in your muscles and get it back to your heart which prevents dizziness, it also helps flush out any of the metabolic waste like lactic acid. It's also the perfect time to stretch, because your muscles are warm and super responsive to stretching... the stretching that will help prevent injuries the next time you exercise. The warm down/cool down should happen immediately after exercise and gradually reduce the intensity of your exercise to rest over 5 – 10mins. For a list of warm down exercise ideas [click here](#).

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