



AVOID THE FITNESS RUT

Feel you've hit a plateau in the gym? Sticking to the same regime may mean you stop getting results. **Sam Murphy** helps you keep it fresh

When did you last make changes to your fitness regime? If it was longer than six weeks ago, then you're probably not benefiting from your efforts as much as you could be. 'Your body has adapted and is no longer challenged by the programme,' explains Jeff Archer, director of London-based personal training consultancy, The Tonic (www.the-tonic.com). 'For further fitness gains, you need to up the ante by challenging yourself in new ways.'

Continually adding challenges to your routine is known as progressive overload. 'For a system to adapt, it must be stressed,' explains Professor Greg Whyte, director of science and research at the English Institute of Sport and co-editor of *The Physiology of Training* (Elsevier, £18.99).

UP THE RESISTANCE

According to the American Council on Exercise, strength-training plateaux usually occur after about six months of training. There are various ways you can 'overload' your body - increase the number or speed of repetitions, the number of sets or

the amount of resistance, or decrease the amount of rest. 'Change the order in which you do strength training, or switch your lat pulldown exercise for the seated row,' suggests Archer. 'If you normally do two sets of 20 reps, try three sets of 10 with a heavier weight to boost muscle growth - this will also challenge the muscles and the brain in new ways.'

GET MORE INTENSE

And what about cardiovascular exercise? Again, there are lots of ways of shaking up your usual regime. You can work harder or longer, or perhaps change the type

of exercise you do or the number of times a week you train. 'Training volume is a product of frequency, duration and intensity,' explains Whyte. 'But research shows that intensity is the most potent stimulus.' For example, a study in the journal *Medicine & Science in Sport & Exercise* found that in young women, high-intensity cycling, compared to low-intensity cycling for a longer period, resulted in significantly greater fitness benefits. Remember the little word 'progressive', however, when it comes to overload and don't pile on too much extra work at once. 'Extra care should be taken to avoid injury when increasing intensity,' advises Whyte.

One of the best ways of introducing some higher-intensity work into your cardio workout is to try interval training. 'This involves alternating tough periods with periods of active recovery where you are still working, but at a level that allows you to recover sufficiently to take on another tough period,' explains Archer. On the stationary bike, you can increase the resistance for a high-intensity interval and then decrease it for your active recovery. If you're running, try alternating between running faster for a minute and then more slowly for a minute.

SPICE IT UP

Sometimes, simply trying something new (rather than working harder in your existing activity) presents enough of a challenge to trigger the physiological adaptations needed. 'Cross training can be the perfect way to keep your workouts fresh,' says Archer. If your neuromuscular system has become accustomed to running, for example, then cycling offers a new stimulus. If you normally use machines then fixed weights will be tougher.

You don't need to be too structured about it - the key is just to change your routine every six weeks and to make sure you keep yourself both mentally and physically challenged.

How to monitor your progress

Now you're changing routine, you need to keep track of the changes you make.

■ Keep a fitness journal and use it to schedule your workouts so you

know what you're doing at each session.

■ You can also use the journal to record what you did and how it felt and adjust subsequent workouts to suit.

■ The more information you include, such as heart rate, distance covered and weight lifted, the more you'll be able to see how well your programme is working.