Do we lose gains from exercise as our bodies get used to it?

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Many of us exercise on a regular basis, and we become comfortable with the same exercise routine. But is your standard routine leading to a plateau in fitness gains? Once the body becomes used to running a few

kilometres each day, is it basically the same as doing no exercise?

One of the most beautiful things about the human body is its resilience and its ability to adapt to physical demands like exercise training. Our bones, muscles, tendons, heart, and lungs, will adapt to the stress exposed to it. This means if you undertake exercise that's physically challenging, your body will adapt to this stress to ensure the same activity feels slightly easier in the future.

This mechanism of adaptation is both a blessing and a curse. The adage "if you don't use it, you'll lose it" can be applied here. If you've ever been bedridden due to a major illness, or gone into hibernation over the winter, you'll be familiar with the dramatic loss of fitness associated with reduced exposure to physical stress (exercise training).

But, do we lose gains from exercise as our bodies get used to it? If we keep on with the same exercise regime, we'll maintain the current gains in fitness, but further gains will diminish and we'll eventually reach a plateau. These adaptive responses are called the "training effect".

The training effect can only occur when adequate stimulus (exercise stress) is applied to the body, and sufficient recovery is allowed. Muscle is a great example. Many adaptations occur, but from a mechanical perspective, small micro-tears in the muscle are experienced when you lift a heavier weight than you normally would. Immediately after training, your body gets to work to heal the "damage" and rebuilds the muscle so it's strong enough to more easily cope with those demands in the future.

Progressively increasing load and adding variation are two important progression strategies to help ensure fitness gains are realised. Progressive overload refers to frequent yet small increases in stress. If stress is increased too rapidly or with insufficient rest, you can risk

overtraining and injury. So, what's the solution to preventing a plateau in fitness?

Increase your intensity

When walking around the local lake for the first time a few months ago, you may have noticed your breathing was rapid but you could carry on a conversation (moderate intensity) or very rapid breathing where talking was more difficult (vigorous intensity). But now, you can walk the same route without a noticeable change in your breathing (light intensity). These are important cues to show that you're now fitter.

If the time it takes you to do the same route remains the same, you are no longer applying the same stress (moderate or vigorous intensity exercise). Intensity is important. To move beyond a plateau, you will need to walk or jog faster, take a slightly more undulating course, or introduce regular short bouts of higher intensity work (run for thirty seconds or so every few minutes) so you're exercising at a moderate to vigorous intensity.

Train for longer

Your endurance performance can be influenced by the amount of time you spend completing your desired activity. You might decide that one of your cycling, running or rowing sessions each week becomes a slightly longer one. Increasing all of your endurance workouts during the week is not recommended, as you might overdo it and injure yourself.

It's advised to increase your running distance by no more than 10% and certainly no more than 30% per week to move beyond a plateau without increasing the risk of injury.

Exercise more often

Increasing how often you train each week can help to move beyond a plateau in your fitness.

For example, increasing the total amount of weight lifted each week (total weekly volume) in the gym should translate to increased strength and muscle size.

Change the order of your exercises

Most of us are limited for time and cram both aerobic and resistance exercise into the same session, but this might cause an interference effect, resulting in smaller gains in muscle strength or size. Some strategies to reduce this effect is to separate most of your aerobic (running, cycling, rowing, swimming) exercise from your resistance training sessions by at least six hours. Alternatively, you can limit combined aerobic and resistance exercise sessions to three or fewer bouts per week.

Preventing a plateau can be tricky, but listen carefully and your body will give you clues along the way. Be mindful that sleep, good nutrition, flexibility, and recovery days are just as important for progressing your fitness as the most challenging session you do in the gym or on the road this week.

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