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ADVICE FOR CHOOSING A PERSONAL TRAINER

trainer tune-ups

Some "expert" advice can get your fitness program going in reverse. Make sure you're getting the most out of your trainer -- and your workout

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Whether you're being cajoled into making your first Brazilian wax appointment or taking those carefully timed steps down the aisle, it can be nice to have someone hold your hand and help get you there. Pumping your way toward your ideal body is no different. A little coaching from trainers has been shown to increase strength gains and help women reach their fitness goals more effectively. According to the International Health, Racquet, & Sportsclub Association, more than 4.8 million people exercise with trainers. But your \$65 sessions might leave you too sore to straighten your legs, or they might do nothing at all to get you back in shape. Here's how to recognize six common trainer troubles, with fixes to get you stronger and fitter — and get your money's worth, too.

Your trainer tells you you'll drop a few dress sizes in 6 weeks.

Why it's a problem: After 6 weeks your low-rise jeans might sit fetchingly below your waist, but you won't get the hips of a 12-year-old boy when you have Rubenesque curves. A good trainer won't put a firm timeline on results, because they can vary widely due to factors like metabolism and body mass.

Tune-up: To obtain specific results, outline realistic goals with your trainer before starting your program. If you want to lose weight, your trainer should generally recommend a cardio-heavy workout — say, 40 minutes of a 1-hour session, followed by 15 minutes of weights and 5 minutes of stretching at the end. If you want to build strength, reverse that ratio and do about 35 minutes of strength training after a 20-minute cardio session, and then a 5-minute stretch session. You should see significant strength-training results in about 6 weeks, says Robert Steigerwald, a New York-based exercise physiologist. Cardio results appear within 3. How to tell if you're on track? You should be able to talk during the hardest part of the cardio workout, whereas you couldn't when you started.

Your workout with your trainer leaves you sorer than if you'd run two marathons carrying your brother on your back.

Why it's a problem: Aside from the fact that you can't lift your arms? The pain can be tough to gauge. "Soreness — caused by micro-tears in muscle tissue — is a sign that your muscles have been broken down," says Robert Vaughan, Ph.D., an exercise physiologist at the Baylor Tom Landry Fitness Center in Dallas. If you're sore for more than 72 hours, Houston, we might have a problem.

Tune-up: Be wary of any move that feels like a strain from the get-go. You should feel the proverbial burn only at the last couple of reps, says John Acquaviva, Ph.D., associate professor of human performance at Roanoke College in Salem, Virginia. If you're a beginner, you should feel it around reps 10 to 12. If you're more advanced and lifting more weight, you might feel the burn around rep eight. "Also, to avoid extra soreness, if you think you can do four sets, cut that in half. If you don't feel even slightly sore the next day, do three sets the next time you work out," Steigerwald says. A good trainer will do this from the start.

Your trainer's idea of an ideal workout is one size fits all.

Why it's a problem: Exercise is as individual as Angelina's latest tattoo. We all have biovariability — meaning we respond to the same exercise in different ways, says Ken Turley, Ph.D., director of the Human Performance Lab at Harding University in Searcy, Arkansas. "Your trainer should ask questions that get at how you exercise," Steigerwald says. If you tell your trainer that you're involved in sports, he should note that you have athletic ability. Also, he should take into account your daily level of activity — if you sit all day, walk to work, or do anything active on the weekends. All of this info will give your trainer a sense of how ready you are for whatever exercises he'd like to plan. He should also get your health history — to check for ticking bombs like high blood pressure (lifting heavy weights can trigger a spike) or osteoporosis. If you tell your trainer that your family has a history of the latter, he might put you on a treadmill rather than a bike, to include more weight-bearing, bone-strengthening activities. Between the ages of 25 and 40, women's bones reach their maximum strength and then begin to decrease in mass by about 1 percent a year, and that rate increases to as much as 2 to 3 percent per year once a woman hits menopause.

Tune-up: If your trainer recommends a move you've seen him do with everyone else, ask him why. He should be able to explain, for example, that after observing the way you move your weak knees, step-ups would be best for building your quads because they stress your knee joints less than basic lunges. Custom design goes for cardio too: Ask your trainer to take your heart rate and age into consideration when creating your cardio program. Often he will simply base it on your fitness level (from 20 minutes of easy walking or jogging if you're out of shape, to 45 minutes of hard intervals if you're fit). That way you can train at the target heart rate for your goals, stepping up your workout if your heart rate is not yet in the range. For example, if you want to burn fat, you should train at about 70 percent of your maximum heart rate. But if you are preparing for a race and need to build your aerobic fitness, you might want to add intervals of 85 percent of your MHR.

Your trainer takes it easy — or hard.

Why it's a problem: If you're not challenging your muscles enough, there's no way you'll see strength gains. And whether you're a novice or an athlete, starting a new exercise with a heavy weight (one with which it would be hard to perform eight reps) is also unwise for one major reason, Dr. Turley says: It'll make it tough for the trainer to instruct you in proper form. And when you can't nail your form, you're more likely to injure yourself.

Tune-up: If you feel your trainer is steering you to the wimpy weights (so light you could fly through 15 reps), here's a rule to remember: If you can power through two sets without feeling a strain at the end, tell your trainer to pack it on. It's generally safe to add 5 pounds for most upper-body exercises, and even 10 pounds for legs. For work with finer joints, like shoulders, add weight in smaller increments, like 2 pounds. For all new exercises, ask your trainer to show you how to do the move with little or no weight first. "You should get used to the technique at a lower weight so you'll form a muscle memory," Dr. Turley says. After that, you can slowly increase the weight. You should max out — be unable to lift the weight without compromising form — at the last couple of reps (around 8 to 12).

Your trainer gives you complicated nutritional advice.

Why it's a problem: Going to some trainers for nutritional advice is like weighing birth control options with your dentist. Even a highly qualified personal trainer is not likely to be a certified nutritionist also. The two fields require different knowledge bases and separate degrees.

Tune-up: A red flag should fly if a trainer suggests — or offers for sale — dietary supplements. She should know that most are not FDA-regulated (because they haven't been clinically tested or proven to work), and can be either ineffective or downright dangerous. Many trainers actually get a commission from supplement sales at the gym. That said, she can give you basic diet advice, like cutting down on soda or swapping whole-grain breakfast cereal for your customary bagel and schmear. A trainer would also know that if you're zonking during your workouts, a pre-exercise snack like a banana will provide fuel and keep your metabolism revved. (She learned basics like these in the certification process.) But if you're interested in taking supplements of any kind, or have specific dietary issues like food allergies or overall low energy, it's best to seek advice from a registered dietitian (find one at [American Dietetic Association](#)).

Your workout is getting stale, or you're not seeing results.

Why it's a problem: If your routine is ho-hum enough to bore you, then it's probably a total snore for your muscles. Your body — like your brain — needs to be stimulated and challenged to get stronger.

Tune-up: Ask your trainer to tweak your routine. She should, in fact, be alert to making changes well before your workout gets old, Steigerwald says. "Any workout should have some change at least every 6 weeks." No-brainer change requests include mixing up reps and intensity. For example, you can superset your routine with lighter reps of a different exercise that works the same muscle. Some muscles in the group you're targeting will be able to rest, but your overall workout intensity will be much higher. So if you're doing chest presses with 10-pound dumbbells, swap your "rest" period for a set of chest flies or incline presses with 5- to 8-pound dumbbells. Adding these superset mix-ups every other workout will keep your muscles adapting to changes, so they keep getting stronger. You can also play with your balance by trading two-legged moves (like squats) for one-legged versions, or perform your exercises on an unstable surface like a Bosu, contracting your core muscles for stability. Switching from free weights to machines (or vice versa) for the same exercise will also work the same muscles in slightly different ways.

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