

Fit Facts™

FROM THE AMERICAN COUNCIL ON EXERCISE®

MONITORING EXERCISE INTENSITY USING PERCEIVED EXERTION

You want to get fit. You want to look good. And you want to stay healthy. But how hard are you going to have to exercise to achieve those things?

To reap the most cardiovascular benefits from your workout, it is necessary to exercise within a recommended intensity range. In some respects, gauging our exercise intensity can be a difficult task. Heart-rate assessment is a commonly used method for monitoring exercise intensity. For some, however, this method can be difficult to master, particularly during exercise.

One of the easiest ways to monitor your exercise intensity is to rate perceived exertion (RPE). Whether you walk, jog, bicycle, bench step, climb stairs or perform low-impact aerobics, your exercise intensity should be within a range of comfort. By becoming familiar with the RPE scale, you can continually assess your exercise intensity and ensure a level of exertion that is comfortable.

WHY USE RPE?

Monitoring exercise intensity with the RPE scale is beneficial because:

1 It provides a double-check on heart rate, especially when the target heart-rate zone is estimated from age.

2 Assessing RPE can be performed without stopping to “check” it, as is necessary with heart-rate monitoring.

3 There is no equipment you can buy to accurately describe your perception of intensity (whereas heart-rate monitors can be expensive for accurate pulse count).

An increase in exercise intensity is directly related to elevation in exercise heart rate and other metabolic processes. Consequently, RPE can be used alone or together with heart rate when monitoring exercise intensity.

During aerobic activities, perceived effort is a combination of sensory input from muscles, joints, breathing rate and heart rate. By using the RPE scale, you can more accurately “describe” your sensation of effort when exercising and gauge how hard you are working. Plus,

RPE SCALE	
0	nothing at all
0.5	very, very weak
1	very weak
2	weak
3	moderate
4	somewhat strong
5	strong
6	
7	very strong
8	
9	
10	very, very strong
	Maximal



RPE helps you evaluate your internal comfort zone, or “how you feel” during the exercise session, with respect to the normal sensation of exertion, breathing, and even discomfort. How many times have you exercised and not felt comfortable, or seemed to be extending beyond your comfortable exertion level? The use of your perceived exertion is helpful in monitoring intensity in order to avoid uncomfortable exercise sessions.

HOW TO USE RPE

Perceived exertion is assessed by use of a 0-to-10 chart to rate the feelings caused by your exertion. For example, quietly sitting in a chair would have a rating of 0. Adding a gentle waving of your arms might increase the effort rating to 0.5. Walking at a pace that you *feel* is moderate would be given a rating of 3. Remember, the rating of your exertion should be completely independent of the pace you think you are walking; it is dependent solely on the feelings caused by the exertion. Increase the pace to a run and add a hill and you could work your way up to a 10 on the scale. The recommended RPE range for most people is usually between 3 (moderate) and 5 (strong).

WHO USES RPE?

Regardless of fitness or training, anyone can use perceived exertion to effectively gauge exercise intensity. Whether you are new to aerobic exercise, or a fitness enthusiast, use the RPE scale to become familiar with your perception and description of exercise effort. Using RPE, your exercise sessions will be more effective and more enjoyable.

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