

Fit Facts™

FROM THE AMERICAN COUNCIL ON EXERCISE®

STEERING CLEAR OF STRENGTH PLATEAUS

Consider this: It's been a few months since you first started weight training and you're not seeing the same kind of results as you did at the beginning. Sound familiar? You may have hit a plateau in your strength-training program. In fact, unless you continually update your program to reflect the changes your body has already experienced, you are almost guaranteed to plateau at some point along your journey toward reaching your strength-training goals.

STRUGGLING TO GAIN STRENGTH

Strength-training plateaus usually occur after about six months of training. They are especially noticeable at this time since the dramatic gains in strength many people experience during the first few months of their program begin to level off. These changes are often the result of continuously using one training-program approach. The solution to the plateau is generally an easy one that involves varying your routine. The following approaches can help you steer clear of a strength plateau.

TURN UP THE INTENSITY

If you have been training two to three times per week for more than six months, performing 10 to 20 exercises per session, and are looking for additional size and/or strength gains, you should look closely at one factor: intensity. It seems that the best stimulus for increasing strength gains is to make the muscles work harder, as opposed to longer. High-intensity training may be the edge you need to get yourself off of a strength plateau.

If you're considering using lighter weights and more repetitions to get stronger or improve the appearance of your muscles, think again. High-

repetition, low-resistance training is usually not sufficient to stimulate significant strength gains. In fact, unless an individual is extremely deconditioned, this type of training is usually ineffective in promoting any kind of health and fitness gains and, if the repetitions are redundantly high, it could lead to overuse injuries, lack of results and frustration.



ADD VARIETY BY USING CROSS TRAINING

If the reason you've hit a plateau is because you're bored, disinterested or lack motivation, cross train within the muscle strength and endurance components of fitness. Cross training keeps your program interesting by utilizing a variety of different exercises and equipment. Initially, try cross training without changing intensity, then progress to changing the movement pattern of an exercise to stimulate a different pattern of motor unit recruitment.

Another alternative is to change the sequence of exercises you are already doing to create variety and a new overload. Because the muscles are being

fatigued in a different order or pattern, they must adapt to this change in stimulus. The next step might be to replace some or all of the exercises in your routine. For each exercise, look at the joint action(s) and muscle group(s) being utilized and replace it with an exercise that targets the same group(s). For example, the bench press can be replaced by pushups, dumbbell presses or incline and decline presses. You might consider scheduling a session or two with a personal trainer who can provide you with alternatives to the exercises you are currently using in your program.

Cross training can help keep you motivated and interested in continuing your program, as well as stimulate greater strength gains. For optimal muscular development, variety is the name of the game.

DON'T LET A PLATEAU BECOME A PITFALL

If you've stopped gaining strength, the key to getting off the plateau is to vary your program. The human body is an amazing piece of machinery, capable of adapting to just about any circumstance or stimulus. By shaking things up a bit, varying your program by introducing some new elements, you'll likely find yourself off the plateau and back on the road to progress in no time.

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