

Time Crunched? Your Workout Doesn't Need To Be an Hour Long, Say Experts



In this article

- [There's No One-Size-Fits-All-Approach to How Long You Should Work Out a Day](#)
- [How Long Should Your Workout Be?](#)
- [The Takeaway](#)

When you're busy, tired, and stressed (and who isn't!?), the last thing you probably want to do is carve out the time—not to mention muster up the energy—for a workout. We get it.

It's easy to shift exercise to the bottom of the priority list, especially if you're stuck in a mindset that your workouts need to take up a lot of time. But there are plenty of reasons to move it back to the top of your agenda and shift your thinking around how long a workout should last.

As little as 30 minutes of movement five times per week offers some major [health benefits](#). Short-term, physical activity can help with anxiety, blood pressure, sleep quality, and insulin sensitivity. Sticking with a fitness routine long-term can lead to better cognition, stronger bones, and cardiovascular health improvements while reducing your risk of depression.

It can also help manage conditions you already have, like osteoarthritis, high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, and ADHD.

And a little movement goes a long way when it comes to your workout length. According to the United States Department of Health and Human Services Activity Guidelines, at a minimum, adults should get in at least 150 to 300 minutes of moderate-intensity exercise or 75 to 150 minutes of vigorous activity every week. That might look like a daily 20-minute walk, three 30-minute HIIT classes per week, or some combination of higher and lower intensity activities. For additional benefits, the guidelines also recommend at least two resistance training sessions per week.

So if a little exercise is good, would more be better? That depends. If you're ready to commit to making room in your schedule for a few more sweat sessions but you're not sure exactly how much you need, keep reading.

There's No One-Size-Fits-All-Approach to How Long You Should Work Out a Day

While the guidelines are a great starting point, they were designed for a nation of more than 330 million people, according to the United States Census Bureau. So if you're asking how long should a workout be for *you*, you're not alone. "That's a really common question," says Nick Tiller, PhD, an exercise scientist, researcher, and educator at Harbor-UCLA. Your workout duration depends on multiple factors that are unique to you, including your goals, your lifestyle, and your current level of fitness.



Goals

To figure out how much to exercise, first you need to know your why. According to Dr. Tiller, getting clear on your short-term and long-term goals is critical. If you're primarily looking for a mood boost and better general health and fitness, you won't need to spend nearly as much time being active as someone who is training for a century (100-mile) ride or a multi-day backpacking adventure, both of which will require endurance.

Lifestyle

The amount of time you spend working out often depends on the amount of time you have available. Commitments like school, childcare or eldercare responsibilities, commute times, or job responsibilities play a huge role in determining how much time is available for exercise, says Dr. Tiller.

Where you live and who you spend time with may also impact your activity level. For example, if you live in a place where it's easy to access bike paths and hiking trails, you can spend more time being active and less time driving to the trailhead or the parking lot. Research has shown that living in a "walkable neighborhood" is associated with higher levels of physical activity.

And if your friends are more likely to choose a game of basketball over beers, chances are, you will be, too. Participants in a study observing the effects of social media on exercise habits showed that simply knowing an anonymous peer was exercising increased participants' exercise levels.

Your Body's Cues

According to Dr. Tiller, "'No pain, no gain' is one of the most harmful idioms we've ever come up with." While it's great to follow a training plan, it's even better to listen to your body. "People need to be mindful of how they feel," says Dr. Tiller. If you push too hard, muscle soreness, fatigue, and even injury can interfere with your consistency. "Adherence to exercise is paramount to reap the benefits. If you don't enjoy your training, you won't maintain it," he explains.

Even very fit people can experience adverse effects from overdoing it. According to Dr. Tiller, symptoms of overtraining syndrome include feeling lethargic, frequent musculoskeletal injuries, and frequent illness, and can have long-term health consequences.

How Long Should Your Workout Be?

If a little exercise is good, a lot is better, right? Not necessarily, says Dr. Tiller. While he says most people will reap significant benefits by doubling the minimum recommendations, at a certain point, you'll start to see diminishing returns on your investment.

"People who consistently run marathons two to three times a year, and ultra-endurance athletes in particular, are at increased risk for developing cardiovascular issues later in life," says Dr. Tiller. Research shows that the while the heart's response to endurance training is adaptive from a

performance standpoint, those adaptations can increase the risks of various forms of heart disease.

“All medicines have an optimal dose,” says Dr. Tiller. Exercise is no different; too little won’t have any effect but taking too much can be toxic. He speculates that most people will see optimum health benefits with the equivalent of half marathon training, or roughly six hours of exercise per week, assuming they slowly build up their endurance.

But what if you don’t have six hours a week to set aside for exercise? Don’t worry. You can still enjoy most of the benefits with a much smaller commitment, and it largely depends on your personal goals. Keep reading to find out how your goals impact the amount of time you should devote to your fitness routine and each workout duration.

Mental Health

If your highest priority is mental health, research shows you might not even need to meet the minimum recommendations.

One study found that participating in HIIT workouts lasting no more than 22 minutes per session three times per week improved participants’ quality of life, perceived stress, and mental well-being. Plus, participants reportedly felt more alert and energized after each session.

But you don’t have to engage in an interval-based workout to experience a mood boost. Another study had participants ride a stationary bike while maintaining a steady pace at 60 percent of their maximum heart rate. Participants experienced greater improvements in mood, fatigue, and vigor after only 10 minutes of cycling, however, no additional mood improvements were seen after 20 or 30 minutes.

Strength

According to the data, there’s no need to spend hours in the gym every single day if you want to build muscle. For many weightlifters, two to three 30-45 minute sessions is plenty.

A *Sports Medicine* metastudy looked at the impact of volume, frequency, intensity, and mode of training on muscle hypertrophy (the growth of muscle fibers) in novice weightlifters. Their findings suggest for conventional training programs, where you’re lifting a weight you can safely handle no more than 8-10 times, you can make progress by doing one to three sets per muscle group with one to three minutes of rest between sets and working each muscle group two to three times per week.

If you're doing a full body workout including four basic exercises (chest presses, squats, deadlifts, and dumbbell rows for example), using the above guidelines, you could be done with your workout in 32 minutes. Do that twice a week, and you're only spending slightly more than an hour a week in the gym.

It's not just the amount of time you spend on strength training that matters; frequency plays a role, too. A small study found that doing six eccentric contractions five days a week was far more effective for muscle hypertrophy than doing 30 contractions in one weekly session.

Endurance

While the amount of time you need to devote to your fitness regimen depends on the distance and terrain of the event you're training for, your performance goals, and the amount of time you can devote to training, less is often more.

According to Dr. Tiller, it's possible to complete a marathon on as little six hours of training per week. "You're not going to break any world records, but you can definitely make it work," he says. However, the better prepared you are, physically, the less likely you are to experience negative effects.

If your goal is to build endurance for a long event like an ultramarathon or an Ironman triathlon, of course, you'll need to put in more hours, but you might need fewer hours than you think. A *Physiology and Behavior* study surveyed nearly 100 triathletes who competed in a specific Ironman competition and found no significant performance difference between athletes who trained 14 or 15 hours per week versus those who trained 20 hours per week.

Cardiorespiratory Fitness

If you have just 150 minutes a week to devote to exercise, and your goal is to improve your heart capacity for aerobic exercise, you're in the clear, according to the data.

A *JAMA* study looked at nearly 200 women who were considered overweight and sedentary to see how the intensity and duration of exercise affected their cardiorespiratory fitness—and there was no indication that more exercise led to greater benefits. All subjects experienced significant improvements in their fitness, regardless of how much time they spent exercising over the course of the study.

And if your schedule doesn't allow you to fit in all your exercise at once, that's okay. A 2022 study found that dividing your workout up into small

“exercise snacks” of less than a minute of vigorous activity at a time can improve your cardiovascular fitness and decrease the cardiac health risks of being sedentary. You can also bookmark your favorite 5, 10, 15, and 20-minute classes on the [Peloton App](#), to do throughout your day.

Overall Health and Longevity

It may sound repetitive, but it’s true—you don’t need to commit to one-hour workouts to optimize your overall health and longevity. Meeting the minimum requirements will serve you well. However, if you’re focusing on moderate activity versus vigorous activity, research shows shooting for the upper end of the range of moderate activity targets might be even better.

A large [2022 study](#) used data from participants’ wearable devices to see how physical activity affected the incidence of heart failure. They found that those who met the recommendations of 150-300 minutes per week of moderate activity or 75-150 minutes per week of higher intensity physical activity were less likely to experience heart failure. Meanwhile, those who exceeded 150 minutes per week of moderate exercise fared even better than those who only got the minimum.

The Takeaway

No matter how much time you have to commit to fitness, the most important thing you can do is select a routine that you can commit to on a consistent basis — even if that means starting out small and gradually building up 150 minutes of moderate activity per week.

Because, as Dr. Tiller puts it, exercise is one of the most powerful medicines you can access without a prescription.