

NO more excuses!

Tired? Stressed? Here's how to
beat the top 8 exercise excuses—and
finally get the results you want!

It's 4 P.M. and you're at your desk, wondering how on earth you're going to make it to the gym when there are umpteen things you still need to do. Don't despair—you *can* get to your workout! The trick is learning how to counter the excuses that keep you from exercising. "By adjusting your thinking, you can overcome any hurdle," says Michael Sachs, Ph.D., a professor of exercise and sport psychology at Temple University in Philadelphia. Taking control of your workouts not only helps you get the body you want, it also makes you feel more in control of your life. So stop making excuses—and start making progress!

BY MARCY LOVITCH
PHOTOGRAPH BY DIDIER GAULT

EXCUSE #1:

“I’m too tired”

“Unless you’re incredibly sleep deprived or jet-lagged, there’s no reason not to exercise when you’re tired,” says Sachs. In fact, working out will rev you up. Robert E. Thayer, Ph.D., and his colleagues at California State University, Long Beach, found that **just 10 minutes of brisk walking can give you up to two hours of increased energy.**

If possible, work out in the morning. A.M. exercisers are better at sticking to a fitness regimen, say researchers at the University of California, Berkeley. If early evening is the only time you have, try drinking a cup of coffee beforehand. The caffeine jolt will get you to the gym and, according to a study from the University of Guelph in Ontario, may also improve your workout performance.

Make sure your fatigue isn’t from exercising too intensively—say, having run 15 miles every day for two weeks straight. If you suspect you may be overexerting, make an appointment with a personal trainer, who can help you vary your routine and put you on a healthier schedule. Most active women should aim for 20 to 30 minutes of cardio three times a week and 30 to 45 minutes of resistance or weight training twice a week, suggests Joshua Margolis, a New York City–based personal trainer. “You’ll see results, and you won’t tire out your body,” he says.

Your diet may also be depleting your energy. “You shouldn’t go more than four hours between small, low-calorie meals,” says Jackie Berning, Ph.D., R.D., a spokesperson for the American Dietetic Association. Berning suggests refueling with carbohydrates, such as a PowerBar, bagel or banana up to an hour before a workout. And be sure to drink plenty of fluids to avoid dehydration, which she says can also zap your stamina.

EXCUSE #2:

“I’m too busy”

Many people don’t exercise because they feel weighed down with work, but **a good sweat session will make you more productive on the job.** You’ll have less stress, a clearer head and a better perspective. “You can actually get more work done after your workout than before,” says Mark Anshel, Ph.D., a performance counselor with LGE Performance Systems, a corporate training center in Orlando, Florida. “When we step away from the tasks at hand, we come back feeling refreshed and reenergized, and that improves our productivity on the job.”

A recent study at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign suggested that people who thought they were too busy to exercise really did have the time but chose not to make it a priority. Figure out how to incorporate physical activity into your workday. Try exercising at lunchtime, when many of us can steal away without missing too many calls or meetings. (For tips, see “The Body You Want in 45 Minutes,” page 88.) Another strategy: Get away from all-

or-nothing thinking. If attending an hour-long aerobics or weight-training class doesn’t fit into your schedule, find something that does, like a 20-minute jog around the neighborhood after dinner. After all, you don’t have to pack all your exercise into one time block. A study from the University of Pittsburgh found that short workout bursts not only deliver the same health benefits but also help people stick to their workout regimen.

EXCUSE #3:

“I’ll never look like Jennifer Lopez, so why bother?”

“Comparing yourself with others is unrealistic and often leads to feelings of frustration, which can sabotage your workouts,” says Richard Van Haveren, Ph.D., a sport psychologist at Georgia State University in Atlanta. Instead, **set challenging but attainable goals, then focus on how you’re going to achieve them,** for example, by running two miles a day three days a week. “In this case, running is something specific that you know you can do, whereas looking like a certain celebrity may not be.”

Charting your progress will also boost your resolve. Keep a fitness diary or take bimonthly snapshots of yourself. “When you achieve your goals, be happy and celebrate,” Van Haveren says. “Then set some more.”

EXCUSE #4:

“I feel as if I’m getting sick”

Feeling under the weather doesn’t have to keep you from the gym. Research from Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana, shows that working out with a head cold isn’t harmful. The study, which divided volunteers with colds into two groups—one that exercised every other day and the other not at all—found no difference in the duration or severity of volunteers’ symptoms. “While exercise may not improve or shorten your cold, it certainly won’t make it any worse,” says lead study author Thomas Weidner, Ph.D.

“It’s also perfectly okay to exercise—if you want to—when you have minor aches, pains or even a stomach bug,” says Lewis G. Maharam, M.D., president of the New York chapter of the American College of Sports Medicine and medical director of the New York City Marathon. You should not exercise, however, if you have a fever of 101 degrees or more, he warns. “You don’t want to raise your temperature further by exercising—that will prevent your immune system from fighting the virus or infection properly,” he says.

If you do work out when you’re sick, drink plenty of extra fluids and take the intensity down a notch.

EXCUSE #5:

"I'm too sore from yesterday's workout"

Light exercise the day after an intense workout may help you recover faster, says Priscilla M. Clarkson, Ph.D., a professor of exercise science at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. When you lift weights, you cause microtears in your muscles that then mend, making the muscle even stronger. Exercise, she says, probably increases blood flow, nourishing the muscles with oxygen and removing waste products. A recent study at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, shows that **people who engaged in light activity the day after a strenuous workout experienced less soreness than those who didn't.**

"Consider soreness a sign of progress, not an obstacle or a reason to quit," says sport psychologist David E. Conroy, Ph.D., an assistant professor of kinesiology at Pennsylvania State University. "Say to yourself, I'm sore because I worked hard, and my body's adapting to the routine."

It's important to note the difference between muscle tenderness and an injury, however. "If there's a focal point of pain, rather than general soreness, there may be some real damage," warns Parag Sheth, M.D., a sports-medicine specialist at Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York. "If the painful area swells, turns red or is severely tender, you may want to see a doctor, particularly if these symptoms last more than two days." Of course, if you are in extreme pain, see a doctor immediately.

EXCUSE #6:

"I'm bored with my workout"

Boredom is one of the major reasons people give up exercise, according to Conroy. If you've done the same routine day after day for months, it's time to try something new.

Researchers at the University of Florida in Gainesville recently found that **frequently changing your routine is the best way to stick with an exercise program.** In their study, volunteers who performed the same workout for two weeks, then switched to different activities, not only enjoyed exercising an average of 32 percent more than volunteers who didn't vary their routines but were almost 40 percent more likely to exercise on a regular basis.

To keep yourself interested, try varying your activity. Experiment with new moves from magazines or books, or sign up for a class you've never tried, like kickboxing, African dance, yoga or Pilates. If you use the treadmill, switch settings, adjust the incline or do cardio intervals: Alternate two minutes running and two minutes walking. "If you usually do cardio before your weight workout, try doing it last," says Margolis. "The bottom line is, if it's not fun, it's not going to get done."

EXCUSE #7:

"I'm too stressed"

Instead of adding tension to your life, exercise actually reduces it. Studies show that when faced with nerve-racking situations, regular exercisers are less likely to experience chest or joint pain, anxiety or depression.

Working out can buffer stress simply because it acts as a distraction. University of Wisconsin-Madison kinesiologist Bill Morgan, Ed.D., compared the effects of meditation, hypnosis, exercise and resting quietly to determine which had the greatest ability to promote relaxation. He found that by diverting people's attention away from their worries, **exercise was most effective at lowering tension levels, with its calming effects lasting up to five hours.**

Exercise also gives people a feeling of control over their lives. "Meeting our fitness goals gives us a sense of accomplishment, which raises our self-esteem and makes us feel more capable of dealing with other sources of stress in our lives," says Mark Anshel.

EXCUSE #8:

"I'm not in the mood"

If you're in a bad mood, a good workout can improve it—almost instantly. In a study conducted by the department of exercise science at the University of Georgia in Athens, researchers found that women with high levels of anxiety experienced marked relief after riding a stationary bike for 40 minutes. Many researchers attribute the exercise-induced mood lift to several biochemical changes in the body, including a rush of endorphins to areas of the brain that control emotion and behavior (a phenomenon called runner's high). Also, **exercise causes you to breathe more deeply, which delivers stimulating oxygen to both mind and body, elevating your mood.**

You might also find motivation in a workout buddy or a friend who helps nudge you off the couch. "Sometimes what you really lack is social support," says Bess H. Marcus, Ph.D., a professor of psychiatry and human behavior at Brown University Medical School. In a 1999 study by HealthPartners, an HMO in Minneapolis, 100 inactive people received phone calls from counselors and health educators who encouraged them to get moving. After six months, 91 percent of them were exercising at least four days a week, thanks to their support systems. ■

F.Y.I.

Even if you've recently eaten a big meal, there's no need to bag your workout. Complete digestion takes only one to two hours, after which there's no danger of vomiting or cramping, according to Lewis Maharam, M.D., president of the New York chapter of the American College of Sports Medicine.