

Who Wants to Spring Into Shape?

Before you lace up your running shoes and start lifting weights, read these do's and don'ts.

It's that time of year, again: The holidays are a distant memory, spring is looming in the not-so-distant future, and you have vowed to get fit. Getting in shape is great, but only if you do it the right way. Michele Olson, professor of Exercise Science at Auburn University, offers these tips.

DON'T start too vigorously. Ease into your routine by going for brisk walks or taking a beginning yoga or Pilates class.

DO work your way up to running, if that's your sport of choice. Olson suggests walking for three minutes, jogging for one and repeating this pattern four or five times. Every two weeks, decrease your walk time and increase your jog time by one minute. Once you're able to jog 20 minutes straight, add five minutes every two weeks until you've reached 30 minutes of straight jogging.

DON'T forget to pay attention to form while you run. Take long strides and keep your upper body relaxed, with your arms swinging naturally. With each stride, try to strike your heel first and roll through the front of your foot.

DO make sure you've got the proper shoes. Exercising with the wrong equipment can cause injury.

DON'T do hard workouts two days in a row. Instead, Olson suggests alternating heavy workouts with lighter ones, so your body has a chance to recuperate in between.

DO aim to have your heart rate up for at least 20 minutes once you've reached a point where you feel comfortable working out.

DON'T head straight for the most complicated machines at the gym. Olson suggests starting with a treadmill for walking (working up to running), and a stationary bike.

DO use free weights—but start small. Begin with 3- to 5-pound weights, lifting slowly and paying close attention to form. When your starting weight starts to feel too easy after three reps of 10 to 12 lifts, move up to the next heaviest weight.

DON'T forget to stretch your hip flexors, your quads, your hamstrings and your lower back.

DO pay attention to form when you're stretching. You should never bounce while stretching, and be careful not to hold the stretch for too long.

DON'T stretch before your workout. Stretching while muscles are cold can cause injury, says Olson. It's much safer to stretch post-workout, when you're all warmed up.

DO pay attention to your body. If you're experiencing extreme soreness or undue fatigue, you're probably pushing yourself too hard. Cut back until you feel good again, and work your way back up slowly.

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