

My experiments with training and fitness

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Prologue: This document is for people who want to get into better shape and stay fit. Do you lead a sedentary life? Do you wish you were in better shape? If you answered yes on both counts, then this document might help you.

How does one get into better shape and stay fit? There is no single method that works for all. This is because everybody is unique. Your best bet is to try out a few ideas and see what works best for you. It will take both, time and patience. But then, you will be well rewarded. You will rarely fall sick. But if you fall sick, then you will recover much faster. You will feel renewed energy at work. You will develop a positive attitude. Your self esteem will grow. And so on. There are so many positive aspects of remaining fit that I urge you to try to make fitness one of your important (life) goal.

Why should you read my advice? Because of my track record. I have been consistent with fitness over the last six year. I have averaged 210 gym visits per year (4 visits per week) and burnt an average of 13,000 calories per month, maintained an average weight of 150 lb. (142 lb. during training/race season). I have done 2 half marathons, 2 marathons, 1 half ironman. Most importantly, in these six years, I have had zero training related injuries.

What have I learnt about fitness so far? In the next section, I will list some general ideas and tips that I have helped me in my quest to stay fit. I cannot claim any of these ideas to be novel. I found them either on the web or by talking to people. I did not implement all of them at the same time. But I gradually added them to my training regimen. I discarded and/or modified the ideas that did not work for me. You will realize that there is lot of advice available. But everybody is unique. So not all advice will apply to you. I recommend taking a tip, experimenting with it, and tweaking/tuning it to suit ones own goals and needs.

Fitness tips, tricks, and hacks based on my experiences (so far).

1. **Prioritize work over training.** If there is a tie between doing work (e.g. studying, office work) and working out like during an impending deadline, choose work. However, if you are skipping a workout most times, then clearly you need to better manage your time and priorities.
2. **Home gym vs private gym.** I have always used a private gym. In my case, this has been the university recreation facility (my job is in academia). You will get better equipment in a private gym but then you will have to pay monthly/yearly fees and then there is the commute time. Home gym is viable option if you have the space for the equipment and want to think long term. Weights are cheap and are a one-time investment. However, cardio equipment

such as elliptical, treadmill, bike trainer are relatively expensive and have a maintenance cost associated with them.

3. **Save time by building a cardio workout into your daily work.** For example, bike to work or run to work. I know a professor who advises students while doing his cardio on the treadmill. Here is another idea that does not appeal to me but might excite you. Use standing desks at your workplace or at home. Still better, put a treadmill near the standing desk and walk while you work!
4. **Use public roads for cardio with caution.** Some people get their cardio exercise by biking and/or running on public roads, sharing the road with motorized vehicles. A word of caution. Be extremely alert of the automobiles around you. Try to run against the traffic direction, so you are always facing the incoming traffic. Biking in the opposite direction of traffic is against the rules but be sure that you are aware of vehicles behind you. A rear view mirror is recommended. Wear bright colored shirt so that you are easy to sight. If you are biking in the night, have a bright flickering light on the rear. Listening to music with headphones is a distraction that is best avoided to be safe. I do all my cardio in the gym. It is boring but it is a lot safer. In fact, all my half ironman training (some of which was around 3 hours long) was done indoors.
5. **Stop immediately if you sense abnormal pain.** Abnormal pain while exercising is a sign of injury. Exercising further will make things worse. Stop immediately. Do not start exercising till you have diagnosed the pain and/or recovered from the injury.
6. **Abnormal pain might be due to bad equipment.** Pain after a running workout might be due to worn out shoes. Pain after a bike workout might be due to incorrect saddle height. Such things are quite easy to fix. Rule out bad equipment or bad form before you see the doctor.
7. **Nutrition is important for general health and fitness.** Eliminate food items that have lots of simple sugar or fat in them. For example, muffins, cakes, ice creams, baked goods, white bread etc. If elimination is not possible then moderate the quantity of such food items.
8. **Two tricks to clean your diet:** 1) Gradually cut down on a food item. For example, to eliminate sugar in tea or coffee, cut it down by half every week. 2) Substitute a food item with a healthier option. For example, whole milk with skim milk.
9. **Beware of snake oil salesman in the fitness industry.** If somebody is telling you that there is a magic pill and/or a piece of equipment which will help you slim without spending too much time or effort, then he/she is lying. If such a pill or equipment existed then everybody would have been slim! There are really no shortcuts. Getting slim and staying there requires time and dedication.
10. **Two strategies to get slimmer:** There are two ways of getting richer. One is to earn more and the other is to spend less. Similarly, there are two ways of getting slimmer. One is to eat less calories and other is to burn more calories. The most healthy and progressive way is to eat slightly less and exercise slightly more.

11. **Aim for a healthy physique:** Maintain a normal physique (e.g. normal BMI) doing most of the year and get in top shape during the race season. This way your interest in fitness will be sustained for longer period of time. Competitive athletes in all sports do the same.
12. **Consistency is the key:** 1 hour of exercise everyday is much better than 7 hours exercise done once per week. Consistency wins in the long run.
13. **Best time to complete your workout is early in the morning.** That way the chances of skipping the workout because of work commitments are reduced.
14. **Another good time is when you are mentally drained out.** For example, if you are a student, this might be after a long class or a hard study session. If you are a working professional, this might be after a long meeting.
15. **Two or more workouts for increased calorie loss.** You can benefit from increased calorie loss will maintaining the same exercise volume by splitting one long workout into two or more short workouts. The increased calorie loss is due to the after-burn effect, which is the bodies ability to burn calories after a workout.
16. **Drink lots of water.** This prevents dehydration. To eat less, drink a glass of water before a meal. Always keep a bottle of water handy, so that you you drink water whenever you feel like it.
17. **Eat slowly to better sense when you are full.** This is because it takes 10-15 minutes for your stomach to send the message to your brain that you are full. By eating slow you will eat less.
18. **Simple plan to start slimming.** Aim to burn a set amount of calories each week. Here is one tip. 1 pound (0.45 kg) of fat = 3500 calories. It is not recommended to burn more than 1 pound fat per week (unless you are obese). So a simple tip is to have a calorie deficit of 3500 calorie per week. Thus, if you exercise 5 days a week, you need to have a deficit of 700 calories on the days that you exercise. This is how I got started and vouch that this simple idea actually works.
19. **Cheat meals.** It is a good idea to have food classified as “non-healthy” such as pizza, fries, ice-cream, chocolates, cakes etc. once in a while instead of totally eliminating them. These meals are known as cheat meals. This practice will prevent you from binging junk food when presented with such an opportunity at a party or at a buffet.
20. **Eat right, exercise right, but do not forget to rest your body.** How well you perform depends your training, your nutrition as well as how well rested you are. One simple strategy is to ensure that you sleep in proportion to amount you exercise. That is somewhere between 7 to 12 hours depending on no exercise to extreme hard exercise.
21. **Cross-train to prevent injuries and to add variety to your workouts.** Doing the same exercise daily makes your body vulnerable to injury because of muscle overuse. It is best to do a multiple types of exercises, also known as cross training. You can rotate between the following: running, skipping (lower body exercise with impacts); biking, elliptical (lower body exercise without impacts); swimming, rowing (upper body with no impact). Cross training

will also help overall muscle fitness and growth. I alternate between multiple types of cardio workouts and avoid doing similar type of exercises on successive days.

22. **Seek slow and steady overloads to improve fitness.** You get fitter by subjecting your body to bigger loads. But the overload has to be done slowly to avoid injuries.
23. **To improve you need to get beyond your comfort zone.** The right overload is the one that pushes you just beyond your comfort zone. For example, this could be running at a slightly faster pace or lifting a slightly bigger weight than what you are comfortable with.
24. **Seek realistic goals.** Setting unrealistic goals will push you over your limits too fast, leading to an injury. Injuries can be expensive (e.g. surgery, doctor visit). Injuries might force you to stop exercising completely, leading to loss of form and motivation.
25. **Weight training to prevent muscle loss.** People who do cardio ignore weights completely. This is not good. Because too much cardio forces the body to burn muscles to generate energy, leading to a muscle loss. The net effect is that you will look pale and thin. You might also get injured because your muscles are no longer strong enough to support your body during cardio workouts. Little to moderate strength training can go long ways to prevent muscle loss.
26. **Doing weights will not bulk you up.** Many people, especially women, do no weight training thinking that doing weights will bulk them up like professional body builders. This is totally untrue. To bulk up you need to lift heavy weights and eat a high protein diet. There is no way you will bulk up like a body builder if you lift moderate weights once in a while.
27. **Slow pace for weight training.** You will find that you can lift much more weight when you are moving the weights dynamically, that is fast. Moving weights fast can be dangerous for you as well as people around you. However, lifting less weight at a slow and steady pace has the same effect on your muscles as moving more weight fast, and is recommended because it is safe.
28. **How to choose weights.** This depends on your goals. If you want to build muscle then you have to go to the point where the muscle you exercise is fatigued and you can barely do another repetition. Muscle-building is typically done by using heavy weights and doing a small number of repetitions, usually 8 to 10. If you want to maintain your muscle mass, you need to lift light weight with more number of repetitions. During race season, when the objective is cardio training, I do light weights. However, in the off-season, I do relatively heavy weights.
29. **Two types of amateur/intermediate athletes:** 1) First, are the people have no time to develop a diet plan and exercise regime on their own. They will seek a professional's help who will plan every detail for them. This way you can get quicker results if you hire the right person and follow the regimen strictly. But this is the costly route. 2) Second, are the people who develop their own diet plan and exercise regime by reading books, website, talking with friends. This is relatively cheap route. However, this route will take time and effort. You will fail many times and also learn a lot. I want to warn you that this route might lead to injuries if you do not proceed with care.

30. **Keep a progress diary.** Keep a track of your workouts. This can be calories burnt, distance run, miles biked, your weight, waist size etc or even pictures of yourself. This diary can be very motivating, especially when you want to skip a workout.
31. **Keep yourself motivated.** You will not workout unless you are motivated. Here are few things you can do to stay motivated. i) Put variety in your workouts. ii) Sign up and compete in races. iii) Workout with a training partner. iv) Reward yourself after working out. Fitness is 50% motivation and rest is working out and eating right. Hence, it is important to find ways to motivate yourself.
32. **Do few races.** This is a personal choice. I have averaged 2 races per year. The most number of races I have done was 4 in a single year and the minimum was 0 (in my first year). One prime reason for this has been the cost. For example, a half marathon can cost you anywhere from \$30 to \$150. A half ironman costs around \$250. When I started racing, I was a graduate student with little income. This forced me to run few races per year, and that thought just stayed with me.
33. **Spend minimal on equipment** Again, this is a personal choice. I have consciously tried spending minimal amounts on fitness equipment because I do not see the point in having fancy equipment unless you are competitive. The most expensive equipment I have is a wetsuit and cost me \$200. I got a salvaged road bike (made by the now obsolete company ROSS) for free and it cost me about \$150 or so to fix it. (I get chuckles from other bikers who have modern, light-weight, fancy road bikes, some of which cost a grand or more). I buy a pair of running shoes every 1.5 years, and they cost me around \$100. Over the course of 6 years, I must have spend at most \$1500 on racing and equipment.
34. **Have a short intense race season.** A short intense race season lasting for 3 months or so is ideal for working professionals trying to juggle their time between training, family and work. Also, training during this period is specific to the races that you have signed up for.
35. **Aim for general fitness off-season.** Maintain a steady and consistent training program during the off-season. Aim for overall fitness and cross train a lot during the off-season. You might want to train in your weak areas during the off-season.
36. **Experiment like a scientist.** You will make lots of progress if you experiment with fitness like a scientist. One way, and perhaps the simplest way, is to change one parameter in your training/nutrition at a time and monitor the effect it has on your fitness. The process is going to be slow but it will get you consistent results.
37. **Have clear goals.** Have clearly defined goals. For example, I will burn 3500 calories this week is much better than I will do cardio 5 days a week. Write your goals down and see them occasionally. This hard wires your goals into you sub-conscious mind. Somehow, the subconscious mind can do wonders without you even noticing.
38. **Everybody is unique. Not all advice may apply to you.** Almost every article I read about running talks about stretching before exercising or having a warm up session to prevent injuries. I think this is great advice. But I never follow it. I go full speed on the running track immediately and I have never been injured. Just because somebody gives you advice

(like what I am doing right now) does not mean it applies to you. Take the advice only if you believe it will work for you. But also tweak it and experiment with it, to check if it actually works for you.