

# Could You Be Over-Training?

Is there actually such a thing as too much exercise? Well, while most of us could usually do with a little more of it, when it comes to your fitness regime, doing too much too soon could actually be hurting rather than helping your weight-loss efforts. If you're starting to burn out, it might be time to relax a little.

By Yi-Hwa Hanna



PHOTOGRAPH: SHUTTERSTOCK.

If you've ever heard the expression "Too much of a good thing," you'll understand what we mean when we say that sometimes, exercising day in and day out, no matter how tired you are, could actually be worse for you than allowing yourself to take a little break when it's needed. Sure, motivation tends to be one of the most difficult challenges for people when it comes to weight loss: Getting yourself out of bed and to the gym on a regular basis isn't an easy feat, and that's usually the biggest change people need when it comes to either dropping a few kilos, or getting fitter and stronger. But for those among us who have got the motivation aspect nailed, going too hard and too fast—especially in this modern-day working culture that celebrates over-achieving, being busy all the time, and burning the candle at both ends—it's becoming increasingly common for women who are determined to lose weight and get fit to work so hard that they wind up doing the opposite of what they want. In fact, if you're "over-training," you could actually feel and look slimmer within days by enjoying a well-deserved pause, in which your body can recover. We spoke to personal trainer, nutritionist, award-winning natural physique competitor and *WHME* Advisory Board member Rob Donker to find out how to know when what we're doing is too much, when to keep pushing through, and when to actually loosen the reins a little bit...



### First thing first: Is there such a thing as over-training?

Yes, but it's very diverse. It depends on the person, their stage in their fitness journey, it could be genetic... there are loads of variables. Certain demographics in the world could be more prone to over-training if their bodies aren't as designed to "take" certain types of training as much as others, while others are more resilient to different types of exercise, if that makes sense. For instance, people from the GCC tend to weaker in the ligament areas, such as around the knees. This could potentially be from thousands of years of not doing extreme forms of activity, which would have come from a history of trying to conserve energy in the high temperatures of the

desert, for instance. There is definitely such a thing as over-training, but when that line might be is really dependent on each individual.

### So it's not something that's just restricted to professional athletes then...

Yes, in a sense, the average person is more likely to over-train than a pro athlete. When someone starts their fitness journey from a formerly sedentary lifestyle then they become very active, for instance, it's very easy for them to over-train, so to speak, since their body isn't ready to conduct that amount of exercise on a regular basis, so quickly. In the first few weeks, most people tend to hurt a lot. Muscles are tender, they find it hard to wake up in the morning,

the central nervous system is very tired and over-worked. That can last for a few weeks before the body has adapted to a new exercise regime properly. I always use this analogy with my clients: Exercising is like learning to play the guitar. When you start, it's a little hard to press the strings. It hurts, so you can't progress in the talent sense because your fingers have started to develop sore spots. In a few weeks, however, if you press on, you'll develop calluses as your fingers have adapted to the environment. Then you can play as much as you want. In the first 3-4 weeks of a new programme, your body has to adapt so it can learn to thrive from the work instead. Once you have adapted—it's amazing how resilient our bodies are—then it's quite hard to

over-train. It's also why, even if you're a seasoned exerciser, if you try an activity that's very different to your norm, you'll be super sore the next day.

### Let's say you hit a plateau. Many of us would then go harder, and up the intensity, in an effort to keep losing more weight... but that still doesn't work. What gives?

While in some cases a plateau can be broken by having to increase how challenging an exercise programme is, this doesn't necessarily mean that an individual has to increase the amount of hours that they train. It's about efficiency and keeping your body guessing, rather than simply saying, "More, more, more." If you are really, incredibly active, then your body can also reach a stage where it wants to preserve itself, in a sense. Your body won't shut down, but it will go through something called metabolic adaptation. So your body will think, "I need to be more efficient with my energy, so I need to burn less calories running a 10km, for instance, than I am currently using to do that." So your metabolism will downgrade slightly, whether that's by utilising less muscle tissue, or eating away at your bone density, for example. So if you're trying to lose weight, it's very important to incorporate those rest days, so your body can feel like it's trying to keep its current identity so to speak, and keep using body fat. That's why when we work on a weight loss programme, it's different from one that you'd have if you are simply trying to improve your athletic performance, as you're trying to essentially coax your body into giving away more body fat on a regular basis. You want it to feel comfortable enough to give away some body fat consistently, and regular rest days can help with that.

### How does sleep play into it? In a very busy week where you might have to sacrifice either sleep or a workout, how do



• *Never underestimate the importance of a well-earned rest day.*

### you know which is better?

Intuition also plays a key role here. If you feel like you've had a rough week with no sleep, that might be more beneficial: If you don't get enough sleep for many consecutive days, it can also affect your hormonal balance, which can again affect weight loss. But if you're having a day where you prioritize your sleep over exercise, and have to choose between them, then you may want to adapt your nutrition a little bit by eating lighter or more healthily that day. If you do a lot of activity and your nutrition is fairly balanced, just make sure you aren't over-consuming food on the day that you're resting.

### Is there any truth in the claim that when you're tired, you'll bloat from inflammation?

When people are bloated, in my experience it tends to be more nutritionally-based. However, if they're training to an extreme level, it could be inflammation. Potentially, having a rest could make you appear leaner, but I wouldn't call that science.

### There's this idea that if a workout didn't hurt, then you didn't work hard enough...

That's a load of rubbish in my opinion. You can still challenge

your body and muscles without feeling DOMS. In many cases it's essential to leave a bit of spare energy in the tank, so you can still work hard the next day.

### What are some signs that it's time for sleep vs. a workout?

One of the signs you should probably take with a pinch of salt is the motivational factor since that's a mind-related sign. But physical signs can be what indicates that you need the extra rest, such as unfounded cravings for bad food, or such extreme DOMS (delayed onset muscle soreness) to the point where you can't actually perform fairly simple exercises without a lot of pain, or chronic fatigue where you find that you're unable to stay away without caffeine or you're over-consuming stimulants, these are all signs that you are overly fatigued. Chronic over training can also have adrenal effects, and caffeine can have an affect on the the adrenal system. If you find that you're relying on coffee or other such stimulants just to get through your day, it may be the case that you are potentially over training, or that you just really need to rest in general. One of the most beneficial ways to successfully continue a weight

loss or fitness journey is to actually take a "diet break" where you take 4-7 days off from training and eating a more strict diet. So you'll allow your body to over-consume calories and rest for an entire week or so. There's many benefits to it, such as boosting your leptin levels. If you're consistently in a deficient state to lose weight, your leptin levels will be depleted and they are what is responsible for releasing the fat cells. They can sometimes get so low that you preserve your fat levels, and may need a boost. The best science behind this is usually found at an athletic level, and top athletes are also made to rest for a whole week with no training or diets, just to get that physical and mental recovery back. Often, you'll find that when you get back to it, your performance is improved and your body composition is actually also improved at times. Your body will be returned to functioning optimally. I would do this under supervision, though, to ensure that you not only get back into it (and with gusto) on time, but also to know when is the right time for it.

One simple way to think of it is, if a programme that you're following isn't something that you can follow for the rest of

your life, then you shouldn't be doing it long-term. So if you're on an extreme programme, you have to end it when you're supposed to, before returning to a more calm approach. You can't carry on doing it with that level of extremity forever, be that with your diet or the hours you spend exercising each day. If it's something you're to do forever, or day in and day out over a long period of time with no breaks or ending points to it, then it needs to be a sustainable approach. In one study that was conducted, experts measured the time that it took for people to lose 5 kilos, using plans with different levels of extremity. They came back to the same people two years later, and as it turns out, those who had taken 6 months to lose the weight had not only maintained it but many actually managed to lose more weight, whereas those who had done it within 6 weeks had not only put it back on, but a number of them had actually gained more weight. It's easy to still get enough activity during a week while still taking two days off. An easy way to commit to that rest time is to take active rest days—go for a walk, a slow swim, something that makes you feel like you're moving but that isn't too taxing on the body.