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Don't overlook recovery



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■ BY MATT BRZYCKI

There are three basic requirements for increasing muscular size and strength. First, the muscles must be loaded with some form of resistance that's made progressively more challenging over time. Second, the muscles must receive adequate nourishment from appropriate amounts of carbohydrate, protein and fat along with sufficient quantities of vitamins and minerals. And third, the muscles must obtain enough recovery between workouts. It's the third requirement - adequate recovery - that's often ignored.

The importance of recovery is undeniable. "Sedentary individuals - those who do little, if anything, in the way of physical activity - still need to recover simply from being alive," says Tom Kelso, an exercise specialist with the St. Louis Metro Police Department in Missouri. "Now, take those who engage in physically-demanding workouts in the attempt to grow muscle and get stronger. Not only do they have to recover from being alive, they also need to recover from the stressors of physical activity. Proper recovery is, therefore, vital and requires our attention."

A CLOSER LOOK

Intense strength training places great demands on the muscles. In order to adapt to those demands, the muscles must receive an ample amount of recovery between workouts.

Muscles don't get stronger during a workout; muscles get stronger after a workout. If the demands are of sufficient magnitude, a muscle is literally torn. Although these tears are quite small - microscopic, in fact - the recovery process is essential in that it allows the damaged muscle enough time to repair itself. Think of this as a wound. If you had a scab and picked at it every day, you'd delay the healing process. But if you left it alone, you'd permit the damaged tissue time to heal. So in a sense, the recovery following a workout is a

process in which damaged tissue - in this case, muscle tissue - is healed.

A period of at least 48 hours should be taken between intense workouts so that a particular muscle can recover sufficiently. It appears, too, that at least 48 hours are needed to replenish the carbohydrate stores that are depleted as a result of intense exertion.

So a 48-hour recovery has become a convenient standard for most people. However, other factors influence the amount of recovery that a person might actually need.

For instance, your level of effort must be considered. Sunir Jossan, the fitness director at the National Counterterrorism Center in McLean, Virginia, puts it this way: "The harder you train, the more recovery you need." Also, some individuals simply might have a low tolerance for intense activity meaning that they require a greater amount of recovery. Another factor is age. "As you get older," notes Jossan, "you need more recovery, not less."

In general, total-body workouts should be done two to three times per week on nonconsecutive days such as Monday, Wednesday and Friday or Monday and Thursday. With split routines, the muscles can be grouped and trained a number of different ways. One basic example is to "split" the workouts such as the lower body and mid-section on Monday and Thursday and the upper body on Tuesday and Friday.

THE PROPER "DOSE"

An appropriate frequency (and volume) of strength training can be likened to doses of medication. In order for medicine to improve a condition, it must be taken at specific intervals and in certain amounts. Taking medicine at a greater frequency or in a larger quantity beyond what's needed can have harmful effects. Similarly, an "overdose" of strength training - in which workouts are done too often or have too much volume - can also be detrimental.

Performing any more than the recommended "doses" of strength training per week will gradually become coun-



terproductive if the demands placed on your muscles exceed your ability to recover.

How do you know if your muscles have had an adequate amount of recovery? You should see a steady improvement in the amount of resistance and/or number of repetitions that you're able to do over the course of several weeks. If not, then you're probably not getting enough recovery between your workouts. This could be the result of performing too many sets, too many repetitions, too many exercises or too many workouts. Remember, strength training will be effective if it provides an overload not an overdose.

THE BOTTOM LINE

While there are certainly other important elements of a strength-training program, the basic requirements are progressive overload, proper nutrition and adequate recovery. So if you want a muscle to get larger and stronger, you must stress it, feed it and rest it. ♥

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