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BY MARILYN CHASE

Ten Common Mistakes To Avoid at the Gym To Stay Injury-Free

JANUARY IS GYM month as many vow to get in shape for the new year. But if you've been away for a while, your fitness temple can be a minefield.

I pondered this problem while clasping a bag of frozen peas (a great cheap ice pack) around an elbow throbbing with tendonitis.

Experts agree there are some classic mistakes that set you up for injury. You can avoid them by approaching your workout with preparation and patience.

People who sit at a desk all day are especially vulnerable. The combination of sedentary work and spotty exercise technique, plus overzealousness at the gym, puts lots of people on the disabled list.

"In this society, people are professional sitters," says Deborah Ellison, a physical therapist in San Diego. "Most injuries in the gym are due to imbalances."

Slumped forward at our desks, with hips flexed and shoulders rounded leave us with an unstable back and a Gordian knot of tension between the neck and shoulders.

Undo the tension before jumping on the weight machines, she urges. As an antidote, ask a personal trainer for help with back extensions, hip extensions and exercises to strengthen shoulder muscles. Outside the gym, good posture girds you for the rigors of a workout.

Returning to the gym after being AWOL for a long time is especially dangerous, not because you're out of shape but because you may overdo it trying to catch up.

"Sometimes we punish ourselves for getting off the program," says Richard Cotton, an exercise physiologist at the American Council on Exercise. When resuming your regimen, start at 50% to 75% of the routine.

MR. COTTON doesn't believe in going for the burn. He tells everyone always to do less than they think they're able to. "Don't try to squeeze that last repetition out of yourself," he says. Here are 10 of the most common hazards that can sideline those who would be buff:

1. **Worn out shoes.** Athletic shoes need to be replaced every three to six months—even indoor gym shoes that may still look clean and new after heavy use. As soon as the support to ankles and arches breaks down, Mr. Cotton says, get a new pair.

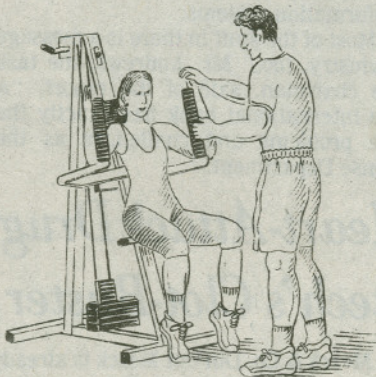
2. **Incorrect bench presses.** Doing too many repetitions, too many sets, with too much weight is a set-up for rotator-cuff injuries, a painful shoulder condition, he warns.

3. **Doing "lat pulls" behind the head.** This exercise, pulling down a bar to strengthen the latissimus dorsi muscles, can be a problem for people with tendon problems in the shoulder. "We're really recommending it not be pulled behind the neck, but instead toward the sternum in front of you," says Mr. Cotton.

4. **Too many risers in step aerobics.** Novices in step classes will frequently pile on the risers to look good in class, risking unnecessary muscle soreness the next day "or

heaven forbid, a knee injury or a stress fracture," he adds.

5. **Overdoing stair machines.** Paul K. Canavan, director of physical therapy at Penn State University's Center for Sports Medicine, cites "the kings and queens of Stair-Master," who tread the machine for hours at a stretch, leaning too far forward, overworking their quadriceps. "Then spring comes, and they go for a run and develop tendonitis in the knee." To avoid injury, he recommends balancing the stair machine's



Rodica Prato

uphill effect by running downhill, or doing leg presses.

6. **Excessive impact.** Whether your exercise is aerobics or running, pounding the floor too hard can lead to shin splints or plantar fasciitis (inflamed connective tissue on the soles). Resting, cross-training and wearing proper shoes with orthotic inserts can help, says Kathy Reilly, a certified personal trainer at Club One in San Francisco.

7. **Lifting weights without a spotter.** A spotter is someone who can not only alert you to poor technique (such as locking your legs or holding your breath), but can also help you out of trouble by reminding you of your limits, as Ms. Reilly learned the hard way. "I injured my back doing crunches with too much weight. Stupid, stupid, stupid," she recalls. "I got down and couldn't get up, I wiggled my back and there went my sacroiliac."

APAINFUL dislocation of the juncture of her spine and pelvis could have been avoided if a spotter had been assisting, or if she had simply put the weight down.

8. **Failure to warm up and stretch properly.** "Because of time factors, people probably don't do a thorough warm-up where they break a sweat and warm their tissues," says Denise Fandel, an instructor in physical education at the University of Nebraska. Always warm up before you stretch, she says. That makes tissues far less likely to be injured.

When stretching, make it a relaxed, sustained movement, not a bouncing stretch, says fitness expert Edward Jackowski, author of "Hold It, You're Exercising Wrong."

9. **Wrong settings on weight machines.** Make sure the seat height and other settings are appropriate for you, reminds Penn State's Mr. Canavan. Too high or too low a seat places abnormal stress on your joints. Many machines are designed for someone 5 feet 9 inches tall. You should have a trainer find the right settings for you.

10. **Unqualified staff.** Check your trainer's resume. Many groups offer certification or training, including the National Athletic Trainers Association, the American Council on Exercise, National Strength and Conditioning Association and the American College of Sports Medicine.