

## Exercise: Getting The Most Out of It

Have you tried exercising but just don't seem to get stronger? Or more flexible? Or worse yet, have you aggravated your back or strained your shoulder, neck, knees or some other part? Have you strengthened and stretched daily, but then injure yourself performing a normal activity during the day?

Given the amount of exercise that people perform, whether in fitness classes, gym workouts, or even in many therapeutic settings, one must wonder why the benefits of their efforts sometimes seems to be limited. Often, people perform a sensible and well-designed exercise program, but lack the understanding or body movement awareness to not only perform it safely, but in a manner that truly benefits them.

The ideas about what makes good exercise are as numerous as its various forms. Exercise supports cardiovascular health, joint and soft tissue mobility, bone and muscular strength, or even a personal aesthetic, making you feel better. Most importantly, though, it should enable one to function more efficiently and without pain in their daily activities.

Most people recognize that maintaining good form is an important element in an exercise. *Form* refers to the shape you hold your body in, or your body alignment as you begin and complete a movement. However, good form can only be effective if it is supported by another key element in effective exercise: *process*. *Process* refers to the way in which you apply your muscular effort, the timing, direction, coordination and accuracy of your movements. If you are only focused on the end position or form of your action, rather than on *how* you are using yourself, your ability to benefit from the exercise will be limited. This is often why people do effectively strengthen individual muscle groups but then injure themselves while doing a simple activity like reaching or bending over to pick something up.

Exercise that not only produces strength and flexibility but enables you to function better in daily life requires awareness and the ability to sense what you are doing with yourself as you exercise. Consider these scenarios and ask yourself these questions: When you are walking on the treadmill, lifting a weight or stretching, are you tightening your shoulders also? Are they moving up towards your ears? Is your head far forward of your body? If so, you are carrying excess tension which actually interferes with you performing the movement well.

How is your breathing? While the speed of your breathing may increase as you accelerate the pace of your activity, can you feel the breath reaching not only into the front of the chest, but into the sides and back of your ribs as well?

Whatever the form of exercise, here are some checkpoints that will help you get the most out of your efforts:

- move slowly so you can sense how each part of yourself is contributing to the movement you are doing

- work within the pain-free range (although there are some conditions following injury or surgery that occasionally involve some discomfort, this should be monitored by a trained individual)
- use appropriate effort, i.e. don't use more effort than is required to accomplish the given task
- monitor yourself for unnecessary muscular tension that interferes with efficient movement
- allow the breath to move freely or in a manner that supports the movement you are doing

When you follow these guidelines and can sense how you coordinate your movement more accurately, exercise becomes pleasurable. This also helps to motivate you to want to continue to do it. Consistent practice that does not become routine, but has some variety in it is also helpful. If you have difficulties or are not experiencing the benefit you would like from your exercise, seek the advice of someone who not only understands muscles but is skilled in analyzing movement.

*Clifford Shulman, PT, CFP, CTP is director of Black Mountain Physical Therapy. He is a physical therapist and Feldenkrais® practitioner treating musculoskeletal conditions, chronic pain and movement disorders and can be reached at 828-669-6896.*