



## Refresh, restore, reenergize

Getting fitter isn't just about working harder in the gym—it's also doing the right things when you're out of it. Here's how to maximize your rest day.

By SARA ANGLE

As hard as you might crush a workout, the real labor happens on the days you don't sweat. "When you exercise, your muscles undergo micro-trauma. Afterward, what are known as satellite cells fuse to the damaged areas to repair the muscle fibers," says Jessica Matthews, senior adviser for health and fitness education for the American Council on Exercise. But this process can happen only when you're at rest. If you keep exercising, your muscles never get a chance to repair themselves, and your progress will plateau and eventually decline.

So taking time off is essential. But if your usual rest day is a date with your couch, cancel those plans pronto, and use these expert tactics to strengthen your recovery. →

## Don't take rest so literally

"There's a difference between passive and active recovery," Matthews says. A passive-recovery day means you're not doing any physical activity, and the only time you really need one is when you're injured or sick. Most of your days off should focus on active recovery, which involves low-intensity movement, like an easy bike ride or walking the dog, flexibility and mobility exercises, or foam rolling. These activities will increase circulation and assist in bringing key nutrients to your muscles so they repair faster, Matthews says. The goal is to get your heart rate up slightly and loosen any tightness, not break a serious sweat.



### A SMART WEEK OF EXERCISE

Schedule active recovery days following HIIT-style exercise, like boot camp, Matthews says.

breathing exercise at least once a day, says Tiffany Grimm, a member of the performance innovation team at EXOS, a training facility in Phoenix: Breathe in for four counts, hold for two, and exhale for six. "This brings the heart rate down, lowers blood pressure, and restores glycogen, which your muscles use as fuel," she says.

## See your friends

Exercising triggers your body's stress and immune responses, and taking a day off allows these systems to recover. Socializing may make them shut down even faster, says Blair T. Crewther, Ph.D., a sport science consultant. That bonding time may also lead to the release of hormones such as oxytocin and testosterone, which have energy-boosting, mood-elevating, and pain-reducing properties.

## Keep your calories steady

Many people dial back their food intake on days they're not working out, but that can backfire, because muscles need those nutrients to rebuild, says Marni Sumbal, R.D.N., the owner of Trimarni Coaching and Nutrition. It can mess with your next sweat session too, she adds. "Your energy stores will be depleted, so the following day, you might feel overly tired," Sumbal says. Stay consistent with your healthy diet.

## Give your mind a break too

Stressed exercisers took longer to bounce back from a strength workout than those who were more Zen, the *Journal of Strength and Conditioning Research* reports. Researchers say elevated levels of the stress hormone cortisol may impede recovery.

Combat stress and speed muscle rebuilding by practicing this

## Sleep, sleep, and more sleep

"Banking sleep has been shown to be beneficial for recovery," says Amy M. Bender, Ph.D., a sleep scientist at the Centre for Sleep & Human Performance in Alberta. When you're snoozing, your levels of cortisol are low and your body releases growth hormone, which helps turbocharge the tissue- and muscle-rebuilding process. ★