

How to make your exercise high last

That post-workout buzz doesn't just feel amazing; it also energizes you to be more positive and driven throughout the day and helps you score better-body results. Use these science-backed strategies to make yours stronger and last longer.

By SARA ANGLE



***Après-sweat
happiness is typically
short lived.
We'll change that.***

T

There's nothing quite like the feeling you have after a great workout—that unique mix of euphoria and Zen that's simultaneously motivating and relaxing. It puts you in a great mood, makes you proud of the sweat session you just aced, and gets you psyched up to tackle the next one. The result: You do more, burn more, and tone more.

Trouble is, the nirvana fades too fast. Within 20 or 30 minutes, poof, it's gone. Fortunately, scientists are learning fascinating new facts about the postexercise high that can help you prolong it.

The biggest revelation: Feeling blissful is not just about endorphins, the painkilling hormones proven to bring on pleasure. In fact, recent studies show that at least two other compounds contribute to the buzz. The MVP is endocannabinoids, lipid molecules that help regulate pain and mood and that our brain processes in almost the same way that it does cannabinoids,

the chemicals that cause the marijuana high. While our levels of both endocannabinoids and endorphins are higher after endurance exercise, endocannabinoids have a more powerful effect on how we feel. In animal research published in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, mice still maintained their after-workout chill when their endorphins were blocked, but they lost it when their endocannabinoid levels were stunted. Scientists believe that

endocannabinoids produce the stress-busting effects of exercise, according to Johannes Fuss, Ph.D., the study's lead researcher. So what about endorphins? They may contribute to some of the other aspects of the exercise high, Fuss says.

Even more surprising, the hunger hormone leptin may also play a role in postworkout happiness, researchers report. A study from the University of Montreal found that mice with low leptin levels had more energy and were extremely

Dialing
back
your
intensity
is a
better
way
to bring
on an
exercise
high.

motivated to exercise. This is key because feeling excited during exercise can result in a bigger high after, experts say.

Now that you know what triggers workout bliss, you can do things to enjoy a longer-lasting buzz. Here's how.

Do something aerobic

The best way to ensure that your exercise high endures is to start with the biggest mood boost possible, and that means getting your heart rate up—but not too high. Research at the University of Arizona found that the body releases endocannabinoids only when you push your intensity level into the moderate zone. Cardio is what counts; anaerobic exercise like weight lifting doesn't activate the endocannabinoid system, the study's authors found. The sweet spot is 70 to 85 percent of your maximum heart rate, says researcher David A. Raichlen, Ph.D. If you don't have a heart rate monitor, use your rate of perceived exertion (RPE) as your guide, aiming for a 5 or a 6 on a scale of 10. Translation: If you barely speak, you're pushing yourself too hard. Ease up a little.

Work out first thing

Your leptin level is low in the morning, which will help you exercise longer. In the University of Montreal study, researchers found that mice who had low leptin ran twice as far as those with a normal level. The reason: When leptin drops, you feel hungry, which in turn taps a primitive portion of the brain that propels you into action. (In prehistoric times, this was a survival mechanism that sent people on the hunt to find food.) As a result, you suddenly feel supermotivated to move, and your stamina increases too, says Stephanie Fulton, Ph.D., an associate professor of nutrition



Arthur Bebeou/Trunk Archive

at the University of Montreal and one of the study's authors. Those vibes may linger after you leave the gym, making you feel good and giving you the energy and ambition to tackle other goals. To maximize the effect, work out soon after you wake up, when your leptin levels are lowest, Fulton says. And skip the pre-exercise snack.

Talk to yourself

People who expected to enjoy their workout were more likely to feel good afterward than those who didn't, research in the *Annals of Behavioral Medicine* found. Before getting your sweat on, tell yourself you're pumped; if you're having trouble believing it, think back to a recent session that left you feeling amazing, remind yourself how exercising will help you achieve your goals, or chat with the person next to you in class about how awesome you're both about to feel, suggests Suzanne G. Helfer, Ph.D., a professor of psychology at Adrian College and the study's lead author. "You can extend those good feelings by also taking time to acknowledge them after you finish your workout," she adds—just pause for a second to soak in the happy feelings before hitting the shower. These simple steps can help you savor the exercise high, making it last, Helfer says.

Get yourself a workout friend

"Exercising with a buddy may enhance the positive feelings you get from endurance workouts," explains Emma Cohen, an associate professor at the Institute of Cognitive and Evolutionary Anthropology at the University of Oxford in England. When you're around others, your pain and fatigue thresholds are higher, which means you can push yourself to

go harder and faster and for longer, according to Cohen's recent research. In fact, social bonding activates the same endocannabinoid system that exercise does, Cohen explains, so you're scoring even stronger perks when you get physical with friends. Doing group workouts or taking classes will help you reap the same benefits.

Do it in nature

Getting active outdoors makes people feel good, more so than exercising indoors does, numerous studies show. Being in nature has been proved to reduce stress and boost mood, benefits that exercise also offers. So combine the two and you get an even bigger boost. "When you're out in nature, the restorative, stress-reducing, mind-clearing experience of exercise can really be strengthened," explains Tytti Pasanen, a researcher at the University of Tampere in Finland. In a recent study in the journal *Applied Psychology: Health and Well-Being*, Pasanen found that taking your workouts outside can even make you happier long-term in your day-to-day life. And that's the ultimate postexercise buzz. ★



Jörg Baduro/Trunk Archive