

Zoning In: How to Determine Your Best Exercise Intensity

A proper warm up and cool down is important for any activity, but it is crucial for runners looking to avoid injury. You've probably been in the gym and watched someone jump on the treadmill, crank up the speed, and run full out with virtually no warm up at all. When they're done they hit the stop button and jump off all wobbly kneed and breathless as they stagger around the gym looking somewhat intoxicated...and not in a good way. We see this all the time; it's a very inefficient way to work out but a rather good way to get injured.

There are a lot of good reasons to run, or walk, and we are sure you know why you do it. But sometimes people do the right activity, but at the wrong intensity to get the results they are looking for. Most people want to lose fat or improve their cardiovascular fitness. We hope you want to do both. Everyone wants the good looks that come with a low body fat, but there's no sense in being a trim corpse that dropped dead of a heart attack.

Trouble is that most people can't get a good cardio workout at the same time as they are burning fat efficiently. Here's the reason. You burn the most fat by keeping your exercise intensity level low and doing the activity for a long time. But your heart gets its best workout when you exercise at a higher intensity for a shorter time. We take care of both needs by doing a "fat-burning" workout on one training day and a "heart-healthy" workout on a different training day.

If you want to lose more body fat, then simply spend more of your training time doing a fat burning workout. You could either do this by investing more time doing your fat burning workout, or by spending more training days doing a fat burning workout each week. However, if fat loss isn't a priority for you (well aren't you the lucky one), then you can devote more of your training days to strengthening your heart.

Keep in mind that you don't require a rigid schedule to make this happen. On days where you are especially short on time you could do a short heart healthy cardio workout. Other days you could do a lower intensity fat burning workout. If the weather is good, a leisurely fat burning walk may be just what you need. Just make sure that you aren't sacrificing a higher intensity heart healthy workout every day in your efforts to keep the fat burning.

What follows here is a brief description of what happens, and what it feels like to do a proper warm-up, followed by a fat-burning workout or heart healthy workout, and an efficient cool down.

WARM UP

Why you are warming up:

- Warming up raises your body core temperature, increases blood flow, and gives your body a chance to adjust to the demands you are about to place upon it. This will make injury less likely.
- Bringing your heart rate up gradually mobilizes stored body fat and increases fat burning enzymes. This also increases the likelihood that you will burn fat throughout your exercise session, as well as throughout the day. Rushing through your warm up at too high an intensity, or shortening the length of your warm up will rob you of these benefits and may increase your likelihood of injury. My experience is that most people do not warm up or cool down sufficiently and properly to maximize their exercise benefits.

How warming up should feel:

- On a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 could be lying on the couch watching TV, and 10 could be running flat out being chased by a hungry tiger, warming up should feel like an intensity of 1 - 2.5.
- As you start exercising, move into an intensity level of 1 with your arms relaxed at your sides
- Gradually increase your intensity level as you warm up. By the time you are nearing the end of your warm up period, you should feel like you are exercising at an intensity level of 2.5. At this time, bring your arms up, bent at the elbows, palms facing each other, with your thumbs on top. Keep your hands relaxed.

What you should do and notice while warming up:

- Keep your breathing deep and low into your stomach. You should not be able to hear yourself forcibly breathing. It should be easy to inhale through your nose or mouth.
- Your movements should be easy and comfortable throughout your warm up.
- You should be fully aware of everything around you, as your warm up should be easy and should not demand any intense focus.

FAT BURNING WORK OUT

How a fat burning work out should feel:

- This should feel like an intensity of 2.5 - 5.5 using the scale we described in the warm up section. If you are new to exercise, or have not worked out regularly for some time, then aim for an intensity level in the lower end of this zone (say 3 perhaps). As you begin to exercise more regularly, you will be able to increase the intensity level within this zone yet still predominantly burn fat.

What you should do and notice during a fat burning work out:

- Keep your arms up, bent at the elbows, palms facing each other, with your thumbs on top and your hands relaxed.
- Keep your breathing deep and low into your stomach. You should not be able to hear yourself forcibly breathing. It should be easy to inhale through your nose or mouth. You will be breathing more heavily than you did during your warm up, but you should be able to consciously breathe diaphragmatically (smoothly and low in your stomach) without hearing yourself breathing throughout your fat burning exercise.
- Your movements should be moderately comfortable. If you are exercising indoors in front of a television, you should be able to easily follow something you are watching on TV. If exercising outdoors, you should be fully aware of your surroundings. For instance, you should be able to see traffic, hear any birds or children that may be present, feel a breeze blowing against you, etc. In general, it should take no focused effort on your part to be aware of the environment you are in, because proper exercise in the fat burning zone is fairly comfortable and doesn't take a lot of effort.

AEROBIC / HEART HEALTH WORK OUT

How an aerobic / heart healthy work out should feel:

- This should feel like an intensity of 4.5 - 6.5 using the scale we utilized above. If you are new to exercise, or have not worked out regularly for some time, then aim for an intensity level in the lower end of this zone. As you begin to exercise more regularly, you will be able to increase the intensity level within this zone yet still remain well within your aerobic exercise zone.

What you should do and notice during an aerobic / heart healthy work out:

- Keep your arms up, bent at the elbows, palms facing each other, with your thumbs on top and your hands relaxed.
- Your breathing will drift up into your chest as your respiration rate increases. You may notice that you are now breathing more through your mouth rather than your nose. Consciously keep your breathing deep and low into your stomach even though it may drift upwards into your chest. You will be breathing more heavily than you did during your fat burning work out, but you should be able to consciously breathe diaphragmatically (smoothly and low in your stomach) without hearing yourself breathing.
- You may notice that you are more focused on working out in this zone. The fat burning zone was comfortable and your awareness level of your surroundings was high. Now, in the aerobic zone, more physical effort is required and your awareness of your surrounding environment decreases slightly as your focus on the exercise itself increases.
- You should not feel any tightness in your chest, and you should not be able to hear yourself forcibly breathing. If you do find this occurring, then you may now be working out anaerobically. This is not the goal of this exercise day, so slow down, breath deeply, and return to a lower exercise intensity.

COOL DOWN

Why you are cooling down:

- Cooling down allows your body to redistribute blood flow and prepare for the reduced exertion levels that will result from your return to a more sedentary state.
- Properly cooling down after a workout will allow your immune system to continue getting rid of waste products built up during exercise, and will reduce the likelihood that you will experience post-exercise pain or discomfort.

How cooling down should feel:

- This should feel like an intensity of 1 - 2.5 using the scale we utilized earlier.
- Gradually decrease your intensity level as you cool down. Essentially you are now doing the reverse of what you did during your warm up. By the time you are nearing the end of your cool down period, you should feel like you are exercising at an intensity level of 1.0.
- Your arms should be extended down at your sides, relaxed, and swinging slightly as you move.

What you should do and notice:

- Your breathing should now be deep and low into your stomach. You should not be able to hear yourself forcibly breathing. It should be easy to inhale through your nose or mouth.
- Your movements should be easy and comfortable throughout your cool down.
- You should be fully aware of everything around you now, as your cool down should be easy and should not demand any intense focus.
- Now is a good time to start drinking more water, since you may have neglected to drink sufficiently, especially if doing an aerobic workout.
- When you are finished your cool down, and stop exercising, you should not feel dizzy, or feel like you are still moving. For instance, if you use a treadmill to work out, once you cool down and get off, you should not feel like you are still on the treadmill. If you do feel like this, you have not cooled down sufficiently.
- When you have completed your cool down, please remember to continue to drink plenty of water. This will replenish fluids lost during your work out and will allow your body to more efficiently rid itself of waste products built up during your work out.

If you work out on a treadmill then wearing a chest strap so that the treadmill can keep track of your heart rate can help you visually monitor your workout. If you walk or run outdoors then a heart rate monitor watch (with or without built-in GPS) can make things a lot easier. Most heart rate monitor watches have zones that you can set so that a tone will sound if you exceed your specified intensity. This really helps if you get distracted since the watch can remind you if you fall outside your workout goal. Many watches also offer other functions that can help you track your workout progress and even make it more enjoyable.