

How to Keep Your Workout from Hurting You

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from the NEWSLETTER, NOVEMBER 2003

PART ONE: INTRODUCTION *and* WHERE TO PUT YOUR FEET

The prelude to many workout injuries is the attitude that exercise is something you do just with your body, or, worse, just with one part of your body at a time. So the most effective way to make your workouts safer is to make enjoying the feeling of moving the main priority of your workout.

The trend since the dawn of the Industrial Age has been to see human bodies as machines, and modern-day notions about exercise often reinforce this perception. Remember that you are not a collection of parts or a machine--you are always a person, feeling, thinking, perceiving, and acting. Instead of approaching your exercise routine mechanically, pay attention to what you feel and make choices in the moment about what you're doing. You'll reduce your risk of injury by naturally avoiding movements that compromise your integrity, and you'll benefit in a larger way as well--your workout will become a means of experiencing yourself as a whole, integrated human being.

My specific recommendations all flow from this perspective of integration. Just as exercise isn't something you do with just your body, each particular exercise isn't something you do with just some parts of your body. Every exercise is a whole-body exercise. You'll move best and exercise safest if you can keep as much of yourself in your awareness as possible. You'll be able to deal with gravity and spatial orientation better, and that's more than half the battle in preventing injury.

It can be tricky to keep your whole self in mind when you're working out if you're not used to it, though, so I've put together seven guidelines to help you. I have a lot to say about each of them, so I'll send one out each month for the next half-year to give you plenty of time to experiment and incorporate them into your workout. I've created these guidelines to suit a broad range of people, but it's always possible that your body and way of moving require a different approach, so please use your common sense, don't do anything that feels risky or uncomfortable, and when in doubt consult a credentialed professional.

So without further ado, here's my first whole-body exercise guideline:

In most situations, your feet belong under your hip joints. Many exercise teachers demonstrate a weightlifting form that involves a wide stance, keeping your feet farther apart than your hips. On the other hand, some exercisers habitually stand with their feet together. Both of these strategies are harmful, requiring you to use your inner thigh muscles to stabilize yourself. This extra effort sets off a chain reaction of excess muscular tension in your entire body, which then compromises the form of

whatever exercise you're doing. So if your shoulders and neck muscles tense up in deltoid flies, it could be because you're not using your legs properly.

Your bones are meant for bearing weight, and your muscles are meant for moving your bones. Any time you get these functions mixed up and use muscular tension to stand, you're going to have problems. Think of your legs like the pedestal beneath a statue: they only hold the statue up if they're positioned properly. If they're off to the side, either the statue falls or you have to use glue and ropes and all sorts of fancy engineering tricks to hold the statue up. Save the fancy tricks and extra effort for extraordinary situations. If you're just going to stand and lift something heavy to build stronger muscles and bones, put your legs where they work the best and make you the strongest.

Where are my hip joints? you ask. Stand in front of a mirror and place your feet so that lines drawn from the center of the front of your ankle to the center of your knee on each leg would be parallel. Then just extend those imaginary lines up (your thighbones lie along this line) and you'll find your hip joints on the front of your pelvis. Of course they're not on the front of you--actually they're pretty centrally located inside of you--but this will give you a landmark you can use. Most people find their feet are about one foot-width apart.

The exception to this rule of foot placement is when you're doing an exercise that involves resistance at an angle to your body, like pushing or pulling exercises done with cables rather than free weights or machines. Then you need to brace yourself against an asymmetrical force, kind of like standing in a high wind. You should place your feet where they stabilize you best, through a process of trial and error at low resistance. Never assume you have the best location. Try a bunch of different options.

I hope this guideline is useful to you.

Feel free to email me with questions at jae@intelligentexercise.com.

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