

How to Keep Your Workout from Hurting You

By Jae Gruenke, GCFP



INTELLIGENT EXERCISE

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PART TWO: YOUR LEGS MATTER EVEN WHEN YOU'RE NOT USING THEM

This month I'm sending you the second in a series of seven exercise guidelines to help you avoid injury and get more satisfaction from your workout. I've developed these guidelines over the course of years working simultaneously in the fields of fitness, dance, and somatic education, and they highlight aspects of movement often overlooked in gyms and exercise classes. Each of these guidelines is aimed at helping you experience every exercise as a whole-body exercise.

The underlying value here is that you're always a whole integrated being--thinking, feeling, perceiving, and intending--and never just a body. Last month I pointed to the Industrial Revolution as the origin of the idea that bodies are like machines. But there's a flip side to this as well: the technology that emerged from the Industrial Revolution, as well as the new maladies that emerged from the exhausting, mechanical nature of work in factories and, later in offices and at computers, also foregrounded human movement. The way people moved became interesting because it could no longer be taken for granted. The majority of contemporary movement techniques were born in the early portion of the 20th century, including Pilates, the more acrobatic forms of yoga, and the Alexander Technique. So the dehumanizing forces of technology also revealed us to ourselves and gave us previously unimaginable healing modalities. The modern era both lends itself to this undertaking and makes it necessary.

So, as a child of our times, I have scrutinized, studied, and experimented with the forces and effects that comprise natural human movement. My recommendations to you are meant to inspire you in your own exploration, using your informed common sense and the refined instrument of your nervous system. I've crafted these guidelines to work for the majority of people, but your needs may be different, so don't do anything at all uncomfortable, and if you have any questions, seek the advice of a professional.

So, with that in mind, here's my recommendation for this month:

Your legs matter even when you're not using them. They have weight, and that weight can pull on your pelvis and make demands of your back and abdominal muscles even when you're sitting down or lying. This goes for all situations, not just exercise. In sitting, place your feet in a comfortable position flat on the floor. Avoid pulling them back underneath you and resting them on only the balls of your feet, or splaying them out so they can't support your legs.

Think of it this way: even when you aren't standing on your legs, they are standing themselves. Your feet need to be placed so your lower leg bones can receive the weight of your upper legs without the use of a lot of extra muscular effort. If you don't provide this support, the weight of your legs will pull your pelvis into a forward tilt and set off a cascade of extra muscular tension that prevents you from moving your upper body well, and probably will particularly impact your neck. This is why no one is comfortable for long sitting on the edge of a wall or pier with their legs dangling (unless it's into water, which is bouyant), and why people who sit for long periods of time on high stools develop lower back pain or neck pain. There's nothing you can do to prevent discomfort if you are sitting in a situation like this. Find a support for your feet, preferably one that brings them up so your knees are at a 90-degree angle, or sit somewhere else.

When you're lying down, the principle is the same but it looks different. Because of the balance of weight in the structure of your legs, they tend to splay outwards to lie much wider than hip width, and they tend to turn so your toes point outwards. The only way to prevent this is to use a lot of muscular effort, which then limits your ability to breathe fully as well as your options for easy movement with any part of your self. Some people habitually lie with their legs parallel or even touching, and everybody feels their own habit to be much more comfortable than any alternative. But a gentle, non-coercive, methodical exploration of how a range of options feels will demonstrate that it is much more comfortable to lie with your legs somewhat spread open and turned out.

Some exercises demand rigidly parallel legs when lying supine, as in the Pilates mat exercises. Follow those instructions, because the tension of maintaining parallel legs is a coherent part of the exercise. But in all other situations, seek a comfortable leg position.

I hope this guideline is useful to you.

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

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