The Importance of Rest

by Lyle McDonald Go into your gym and look around some time. What I want you to look for is the people with the knee braces, wrist wraps, elbow braces, etc. continuing to train intensely (or at least trying). Or the ones just going through the motions, who are only there out of some confused sense of obligation or what have you. Perhaps, if you think about it, you’re one of those people.

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Rest Days

I want you to ask yourself how many days off you take each week. And when I say off I mean off. Not “I do an hour of aerobics but that doesn’t count.” I mean off. One, maybe two. Probably not that many. How many people (the ones wearing the various braces) are in there every day, sometimes more than once? Either they are doing weights multiple times per week and cardio on the off days or they are doing both each day.

Trust me, I’ve been there too, trying to train 6 days/week (I at least conceded one day off per week, although I didn’t do that consistently until my late 20’s) and wondering why I was burnt out, tired all the time, not performing well, etc.

But you argue, Lance trains 6 days/week, so do most road cyclists. Well, elite road cyclists are genetic freaks, train full time (they don’t have job and such cutting into their time) and the majority of the peleton is using drugs so you really shouldn’t derive very many conclusions about how you, who has a job, has real life stress and isn’t preparing for the Tour De France.

Most runners run 6 days/week. Yeah, and most runners are overtrained and chronically injured. And Arnold and his ilk lifted 6 days/week. Genetics and drugs. Same with the Bulgarians, the Soviets, you name it. These are the genetic elite, training full time with no job or life stress, and juiced to the gills. Unless you have all those things going for you, you shouldn’t try to emulate their training. And given that a massive percentage of elite athletes report being overtrained, perhaps even they should be training less frequently.

Which is simply a long winded way of suggesting that, if you are anything like the normal trainee, you’re doing too much. You probably train too many days per week and take too few days off. You’re lifting 3-4 days/week and trying to do cardio another 3-4 days/week (this is especially true if you are a fat/weight obsessed female). And you wonder why your joints are always kind of sore, you don’t really look forwards to your workouts anymore and everything that signals, if not true overtraining, at least overreaching (the distinction is another topic for another day).

So, I want you to look at your current training schedule, how many days are you training, how many days do you have off? I recommend that everyone, and this is true from the beginning exerciser to the elite athlete have at least one day completely off from training. That’s the minimum.

This is called passive rest, I want you to sit around all day. I’m not a religious person but this is best summed up by a quote from Charlie Francis’s book Speed Trap. Francis had asked his coach if they could afford to take Sunday’s off. His coach told him “The Lord made the world in six days, and on the seventh he rested. Do you think you could do better than that?” Most elite athletes take at least one day off from training each week and the ones who don’t usually pay for it in the long run. Why do you think you need more training than they do? If you simply can’t stay still and not do something, go for a brisk walk outdoors. But stay out of the gym. See if you aren’t refreshed when you go back to the gym the next day.

At least one (and probably two) other days per week, you should be doing active rest. This is light activity done to improve recovery. An endurance cyclist who typically trains for 2 hours might spin very easily (at a heart rate of 130-140 or lower) for 30-40 minutes. And I mean light spinning, almost no pressure on the pedals. It pumps some blood, burns a few calories, and helps recovery. Sipping a protein/carb drink during active recovery may help shuttle nutrients to the worked muscles. A runner should do some sort of cross training to give their connective tissues a rest. Try the EFX/elliptical or something non-impact.

People involved in heavy weight training can do something similar for passive rest, just very light cardio activity (brisk walking, spin on the bike) but, again, the intensity should be pretty low. If your trying to bodybuild, your focus should be on lifting anyhow and 3-4 days/week should be plenty for everyone. Most powerlifters only lift 4 days/week (on average) although many are starting to do extra stuff of late. Again, these are typically full time athletes and there is always the steroid factor to consider. Why do you think you need more time in the weight room than they do? If you want to do a little aerobic conditioning, either double it up on one of your training days or keep it very low intensity on the off days.

Even for general fitness exercisers, I think taking extra days off (or performing active rest) is beneficial. Find places to cut your weight training down (most people’s workouts are absurdly long) and put some of your cardiovascular work after your weights (on upper body days). I think you get the idea. Find a way to get your training down to 3-4 days/week total with 1 day completely off and a couple of days of active recovery.

Try this for the next 2 weeks, cutting back your training days and increasing how many days you rest and recover. See if you don’t freshen up and start to get more enthusiastic about the days you are in the gym. In the follow up to this article, in 2 weeks, I’ll talk about taking longer breaks from training and why it’s such a good idea.

More Rest Considerations Now, I want you to ask yourself when the last extended break from training you took was. By extended I mean more than a day or two off from training, more like a 5-14 day span where you stayed out of the gym, where you either did nothing or did something completely different than your normal training program. If you can’t think of one, try to think about the last time that you got sick or injured and were forced to take an extended period of time off from your training. What did you notice when you came back?

Unless it was a very extended time off (more than 2 weeks), I bet you were far more enthusiastic about your training, some of those little twinges or aches had gone away. Perhaps you busted through your previous plateaus after a short break in period.

And then, if you’re like everyone else out there, you went right back to training the way you had done before. Hammering for weeks, months, even years on end without a break. Or until you got sick or injured again. Repeat the cycle until you wise up. If you ever do.

Odds are, if you’re like most out there, the mere idea of taking 5 days (or more) off from training fills you with fear. All your strength, muscle and fitness will just disappear. And, oh my god, you’ll just get fat.

Except that the detraining studies, and real-world experience, show something different. You lose very little fitness in a 5-14 day span, depending on what you’re looking at. I mean think about it this way: if you spend 11.5 months out of the year getting in-shape, how much fitness can you honestly lose in 5-14 days? Not very much is the answer.

Given how overtrained many people are, many come back stronger or fitter than before. Even in terms of fat loss, I’ve seen people who were training at insane levels and watching their diet get leaner when they took a break from all that training and ate more (this magic trick usually lasts about a week maximum).

Almost all athletes take easy periods in their training (some call this unloading or deloading) although this depends significantly on how they are training. And the ones that don’t should. The average scheme is to train intensely for 3 weeks and then take an easy week where volume, intensity, frequency or all three are reduced. Others will go 5-6 weeks and then take an easy week.

My generic bulking routine, alternates 2 weeks of easy training with 4-6 weeks pushing the weights up I’d probably suggest, on average, taking a full week off from training after every 3 cycles (18-24 weeks) of continuous training.

Longer cycles of 16-18 weeks are often followed by periods of 5-10 days completely off from training. Charlie Francis, sprint coach extraordinaire, often gave his athletes 5 days completely off from training between every 12-16 week block. So they’d work up to a new peak over 12 weeks (on a 3 week hard/1 week easy schedule) including their final taper, take 5 days off to recharge and then do it again. Yet most people training recreationally think they can go all out year round (bodybuilders are notorious for this).

Additionally, at the end of every training season, most athletes will take anywhere from 2-4 weeks away from their sport during what is called the transition phase (where you transition from the previous season of training to the next). This used to be called the off-season, athletes would sit around for a month or two but, with periods that extended, they would detrain and lose a lot of fitness. Now it’s closer to 2-4 weeks but with some amount of activity to prevent too much fitness loss.

So, I want you to look at your last year’s training, when’s the last time you took an extended break from training, or took a week or two to do something completely different. Stay out of the weight room, go do bodyweight circuits in the park. Hike in the hills for some leg training, just go do something different. And don’t be afraid to take 5 days of easy training every 3-4 months to give your body and mind a break, you won’t lose anything and you may find that you gain a lot when you come back to the gym. Both physically and psychologically. Because, let’s face it, if training is a chore and you’re not pushing yourself, you’re not making gains anyhow. Taking some time away from your training can refresh the mind as well as the body and get you more excited about your training.

From Body Recomposition - The Home of Lyle McDonald: http://www.bodyrecomposition.com . We thank Mr. McDonald

for allowing us to share this article with our members.