

the EXERCISE FACTOR

If you're always saying you don't have time to exercise, then now is the time to get real. Whether you're a morning person or a night owl, fitness expert **Kathleen Alleaume** reveals how to release your inner athlete.

YOU'VE PROBABLY HEARD the expression, "I'm a morning person" or perhaps more often, "I'm not a morning person". Some people swear by a 6am jog to get their hearts racing and psych themselves up for the day ahead. Others wouldn't dream of breaking a sweat before noon, preferring an up-beat spin class to release the stress of the day. So, does it really matter what time of day you exercise?

The truth is, the research is inconclusive. However, research has proven that the time of day can influence how productive your workout is. So, let's look at the pros and cons of morning versus afternoon exercise. >>>

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MORNING TIPS

- Ensure a proper warm-up to avoid the risk of injury.
- If you exercise on an empty stomach, eat a balanced meal the night before (a mix of carbohydrates and protein) to ensure you have enough energy to optimise fat burning.

AFTERNOON TIPS

- Avoid exercising too close to bedtime to avoid possible insomnia or sleep disruptions.
- Eat a balanced meal within 30 minutes of exercising to aid muscle recovery.

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Understand your body clock

First you need to understand that your circadian rhythm, often referred to as the body clock, is a biological process operating in roughly a 24-hour cycle. It is, after all, what regulates your sleeping and waking patterns. However, among other physiological functions, it regulates body temperature, blood pressure, alertness and metabolism. Although circadian rhythms are innate, we can reset them based upon our behaviours. For example, using an alarm clock, establishing meal times and even by the time of day that we typically choose to exercise.

The perks of the morning

Some people believe early morning exercise gives them more energy, brightens their mood for the day and provides that sense of accomplishment of knowing that “it’s out of the way”. Studies have shown that people who exercise in the morning are more consistent, compared with those who exercise at other times of the day.

Another benefit of dragging yourself out of bed is that the energy you create by exercising will sustain you throughout the day and may even improve concentration and mental alertness. A nutritional benefit is that you’re less likely to skip breakfast because exercise stimulates an appetite.

And just in case you haven’t heard this before – breakfast is the most important meal of the day. It’s the perfect time to get a lot of your daily nutrient requirements – calcium in milk or yoghurt, fibre and slow-releasing carbohydrates in wholegrain breads and cereals, protein in eggs or nuts, and vitamins and minerals in fruit or vegetable juice.

However, body temperature is at its lowest just before waking, so the likelihood of injury increases. Therefore, you should allow more time to warm up to reduce the risk of injury.

For those who can’t brave exercising on an empty stomach, a small cup of tea or juice, or a banana is fine, particularly if training is intense. A heavy meal is not recommended if you want to burn fat.

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What is the best time to burn fat?

The short and sweet answer is anytime! Continuous cardiovascular exercise – walking, jogging, stair-climbing or cycling for at least 30 minutes – will burn body fat no matter when you do it. However, research shows that exercising on an empty stomach burns a higher amount of fat. Here’s why. If you eat dinner at 7pm and breakfast at 7am, that’s 12 hours without food. During this 12-hour overnight fast, you wake up with lower blood sugar levels – the optimum environment for burning a greater proportion of fat relative to carbohydrate.

But if mornings are still not your thing, research also shows that a greater proportion of energy (both fat and carbohydrates) is burned with more “vigorous” exercise. Vigorous implies activity that makes you “huff and puff”, for example where talking in full sentences between breaths is difficult.

When later is better

Exercising in the afternoon or early evening is when body temperature is at its peak. It’s also a time when the body’s systems are geared up for action: when the heart and lungs are performing most efficiently and when people are most

awake and alert, so the likelihood of injury is less. Research shows that muscular strength peaks in the early evening.

But don’t exercise within three hours of eating a heavy meal, or one to one-and-a-half-hours of eating a light snack.

... but, not too late

Exercising too close to bedtime may interfere with sleep and may cause insomnia. Exercise stimulates the body and raises body temperature, which is the opposite of what you want near bedtime, because a cooler body temperature is associated with sleep.

Are you a sparrow or an owl?

If your goal is to lose body fat, consider getting up early and doing cardio before you eat. If you have trouble with consistency, exercising in the mornings may be your best bet. Or maybe weight training or Pilates suits you after work. The most important thing is that you stay active and make it a consistent part of your life. But remember that your body can adapt to almost any condition if you give it enough time. I recommend giving yourself at least one month to adjust if you have to switch exercise schedules from morning to afternoon or vice-versa.

OVERCOMING WEIGHT PLATEAUS

Although undeniably frustrating, weight-loss plateaus are normal. But thankfully, there are ways to get the scales moving downwards again. Here’s how:

● CHANGE YOUR FITNESS ROUTINE

If you’ve been doing the same exercise routine for a few months, try something different. Once the body has mastered the movements of a particular program, it no longer requires as much energy to perform the same routine and will stop responding to it. If you walk for 30 minutes a day, eg, increase that to 45 minutes. Or step up your pace and walk a little faster to get your metabolism fired up. Or try different times of the day: work out in the

morning for a few weeks, then try noon, then early evening and see which you enjoy most. Consider joining a fitness club, such as Curves, to assist you with diet and nutrition as well as your exercise.

● ADD RESISTANCE

Muscle burns more kilojoules than fat, even while at rest, so building muscle is a good way to give your metabolism a boost and burn extra energy. If you’re not already weight training, then this may be a good time to incorporate some resistance training into your workout. If you’re already strength training, it could be time to increase the resistance you’re using by adding more weight or adding more repetitions.