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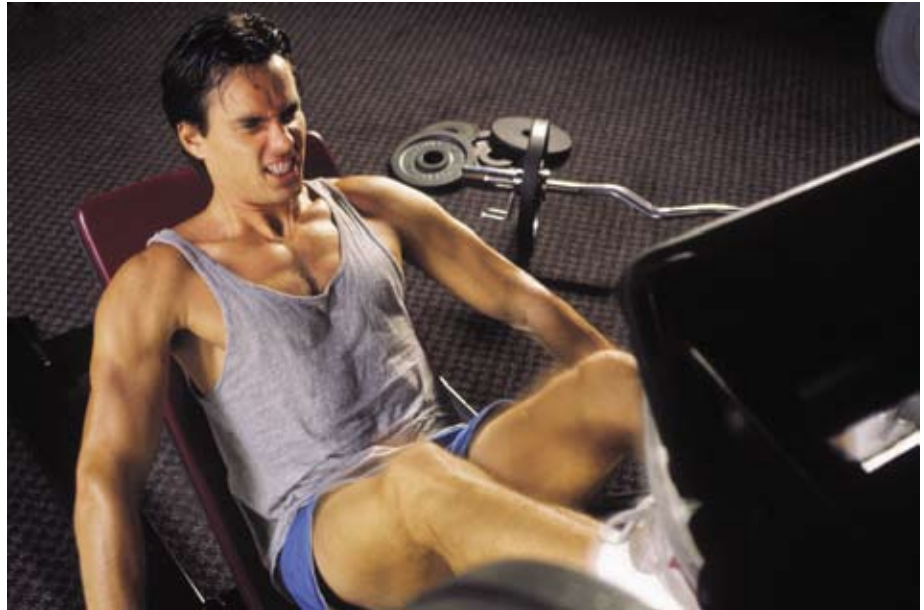
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The overtraining trap



I recently had trouble explaining to a new client that he was overtraining. Like many clients, he had difficulty comprehending why his progress had plateaued before he had got anywhere near reaching his fitness target. He had been doing three weights sessions per week, total body workouts lasting around ninety minutes per session. It became apparent that this program was not achieving his desired results, so, deciding to apply logic to the situation, he decided to increase his training. Welcome to the Overtraining Trap.

I can see how it makes sense to respond to a lack of success with this 'the more you put in, the more you get out' reaction, but it is often the worst attitude to instill in a client. In this example my client was already overtraining with his three sessions per week, so to take it further would simply result in more blood, sweat and tears, but negligible results. Every gym session should make a significant impact on your goals, whatever they may be. A sense of self-duty forces overtrainers to keep pushing themselves harder in an elusive search for gains.

Time to recover

So why does a massive workload not lead to massive gains in physique? Because it leaves insufficient recovery time. It takes at least seventy-two hours for muscles to recover from an intense workout, and it makes no sense to interfere with this repair. To get scientific for a moment, every time the body overloads on weights, the muscles get broken down and micro-tears appear in the fibres. Although this sounds bad, it is extremely beneficial and the body supercompensates by repairing this fibre stronger and, with correct nutrition, bigger. Most of the size gains occur in the first forty-eight hours, but MRI scans have proved that it takes longer for the repair to knit fully. For this reason, a total body workout just twice a week allows for plenty of work, but also plenty of recovery time to be rewarded through sustained strength and size gains.

No one has ever developed a single fibre of muscle in the gym. All the gains come whilst at rest. Indeed, the biggest proportion of muscle growth occurs while you sleep. Ignore anyone who tells you that you need X amount of hours sleep per night; everybody is different and clients' sleep requirements change on a daily basis depending on the exertion they have endured each day, with weight training increasing this need. Your client should also relax while awake. The

mindset of individuals who are focused on their goals and feel guilty if they are not at the gym is understandable, but they must be told to resist the temptation to do 'a little light work' or begin to use a split routine if, as is the case for most people, their training goals negate the need for four sessions a week.

Understanding overload

You should be cautious about adapting split routines if they are not really necessary. Your clients will lose out on vital rest days and the huge hormone-surge that accompanies an overload of big muscles such as in the legs cannot be utilised by other muscles (i.e. 'piggybacking', when muscles like biceps benefit from the growth hormones caused by leg work). Only advanced bodybuilders tend to gain from split sessions and have to eat huge amounts to compensate for added exercise. A few people are naturally blessed with the ability to recover from exercise unnaturally quickly (and some unwisely inject 'help') but you are very unlikely to end up with one of these people as a client.

Essentially, when overloading muscles with weights, there is a breakdown (catabolic) phase and a build-up (anabolic) phase. Although a basic idea, understanding how to make the most of the anabolic phase is one of the most important concepts in weight training. The same applies to reducing the effect of the breakdown (catabolic) phase. Some breakdown must occur to stimulate the surge in muscle building hormones, like testosterone, human growth hormone and insulin-like growth factor 1 (IGF-1s), but there comes a point at which you begin to cause more catabolic action without any corresponding match in the anabolic action it is meant to stimulate. This massively hits potential growth, and an early spell of compromised effectiveness is soon replaced by a plateau in progress. At this point, the catabolic and anabolic phases are balanced, cancelling each other out.

To make progress, you must minimise the catabolic phase without compromising the anabolic phase; a smaller amount of sets on a muscle with increased intensity is the best way to do this. There is no way to define a limit as to the maximum number of sets an individual can do without doing more than is necessary, but two very intense sets (failing between ten and twelve reps) is consistently effective. You should also avoid training the same muscle too much within the same session – it will increase the breakdown but as it is weakened from previous exertion it will not be able to overload itself to an extent that makes the exercise beneficial. Four big exercises can cover all the major muscles groups; adding several more to work the core can complete a short but intense training session that, if followed by relaxation and good nutrition, will catapult your clients' progress.

Work smart

Although it can be tempting to lazily tell your clients to go forth and use common sense, it is not an option in this case. Logic has constantly told us from a young age that you only get out what you put in. In this case, however, science shows us that the reactions caused by weight-training require time to bear fruits and so these laws must be obeyed in order to make significant progress. Instead of working hard, we must work smart (and then work hard at working smart). There will still be those who have toiled for many fruitless months or even years in the gym without understanding their lack of progress, who doubt this 'less is more' approach. This reluctance to accept that the answer is easier than they could ever have thought can be eliminated by the progress they experience after trialling this approach. Reduce the number of gym sessions, increase the intensity, and increase results. ♦



Marek Doyle

Marek is an exercise and nutrition consultant from Basingstoke, UK. The advice Marek gives is determined by science but delivered in a common-sense manner. He has worked with a range of clients, from members of the public to competing athletes and celebrities.

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