Don't Lose Fitness

People often comment on how it seems to take a long time to get fit but not long at all to lose fitness. Is this really the case or does it just feel that way?

The time it takes to lose fitness depends on how fit you are to begin with, how long you have been exercising regularly for and how long you stop for.

People who are extremely fit such as elite athletes and highly trained sportspeople often experience a rapid drop off in cardiovascular fitness within 2-3 weeks of either radically reducing their training or ceasing their training altogether (as could be the case if they were sick or injured). After this initial drop off in fitness though, very fit people may still retain a level of fitness that is significantly higher than those who start from a moderate, low or unfit base for up to 12 weeks.

On the other hand, people who have moderate or low fitness levels to begin with show less change in cardiovascular fitness within the first few weeks of reducing or ceasing training but in the weeks after that their fitness declines rapidly. Depending on how long they continue very low levels of activity or no activity at all they may revert to a very low level of fitness or an untrained state within a few months.

In one study a group of sedentary individuals embarked on a cycling based fitness program for two months. During this time their cardiovascular fitness improved significantly. At the end of the two-month period they stopped the program for the next two months. When they were re-tested at the end of the second two-month period the participants had lost the aerobic fitness gains they had made during the first two months and they had returned to their pre training fitness levels.

Reducing the amount of fitness training rather than ceasing all physical activity completely may slow the rate at which an individual's fitness level declines. There are studies that support this. In one such study it was found that a group of sedentary men who did strength training three times a week for three months and then cut back to training one day a week still retained some of the strength gains they had made in the first three months of training.

So, how do you prevent losing the fitness you've worked so hard to gain? The answer is simple - – keep physically active on a regular basis. If however you have to reduce your fitness training for whatever reason (sickness, injury, travel etc) then do just that – reduce it, but don't stop and do nothing. Continue to do whatever you can.

It is much easier to stay fit than it is to get fit again.