

Stiff and Sore After Exercise? What Does It Mean?

Many people – particularly those who are just getting into physical activity or those who are stepping their physical activity up to a higher level – complain of muscular stiffness or soreness in the days following a workout. In both these cases some stiffness or soreness is common. It is normally just the body's reaction to the muscles being worked in a way that they are not used to. This is part of the natural process of more being demanded of the body, and the body absorbing and adapting to the demand in order to advance to a higher level of fitness. In this context there is some truth in the expression “no pain, no gain”. Muscular discomfort following exercise shows that the fitness demands are being ‘stepped up’ from what the body is used to and it is only by progressively stepping up in this way that a greater level of fitness can be achieved.

This does not mean however, that all increases in physical activity will result in post exercise stiffness or soreness. The body progressively develops its tolerance to incremental increases in physical demand and many increases can be accommodated without stiffness and soreness. Also, there are strategies that you can use to help deal with any muscular stiffness or soreness you experience with a new or more demanding workout. For example:

- Take 15-20 minutes prior to an exercise session to fully warm the body up. It can take this long for the body to be ready and primed for exercise. The warm up can also be used to determine if stiffness or soreness from a previous exercise session is just temporary, and will mostly subside with the warm up, or if it is deeper or more serious and may need to be treated as either an over use condition or worst case, a pre-injury or injury condition.
- If after a thorough warm up there is still some residual stiffness – but not soreness – it is generally okay to continue with the exercise session provided that the intensity is light and the duration reduced.
- Each exercise or activity in the session should then be introduced gradually – i.e., slowly and without force, building in speed and intensity but not to a maximum point. In these circumstances it is best to stick with exercises that the body is used to and to avoid doing any of them vigorously.
- Performing exercises to the body's limits is best left for days when the body starts fresh and well rested, is pain free and fully prepared for a hard, demanding session.
- During and after each exercise session drink plenty of water and stretch.
- If on any occasion there is still significant stiffness, soreness or localised pain after a 15-20 minute warm up, then the exercise session should be stopped and ice should be applied to painful sites.
- The body should then be rested for at least 24 hours before another exercise session is attempted. During this time ice should continue to be applied to painful sites and the advice of a medical practitioner may be sought about the use of a low level anti inflammatory (such as aspirin or ibuprofen) for temporary relief of the discomfort.
- When the next exercise session is attempted a 15-20 minute warm up should be undertaken and the guidelines above followed again.

Post exercise stiffness and soreness is not necessarily a bad thing in that it does not necessarily indicate that the body is not coping with the exercise regime or that the body is in a pre injury or injury state. It can simply be an uncomfortable but temporary part of developing fitness and conditioning, and it can be worked through. However, care should always be taken with stiffness and soreness that persists so that it can

be treated for what it is. Don't continue to exercise if pain persists. Seek medical advice.

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