

Muscle Overload: Why Is It Important to Your Workout?©

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The term muscle overload certainly sounds a little ominous! But in reality, it's the basis of your body's ability to make improvements from exercising. It's a concept that you should embrace --- not avoid --- if you want to make physical gains from your workouts. Simply stated, overloading your system means exercising at a level that's greater than what you're normally accustomed to. Used smartly (meaning in a gradually progressive way), it can lead to improvement in your health and fitness. Used incorrectly, it can lead to injury. So BE CAREFUL!

You can overload your system through either performing cardiovascular exercise, or resistance training. The type of exercise you do will cause your body to make adjustments and improve its capacity for physical activity specific to the type of exercise performed. For example, increased cardiovascular exercise could result in an improved cardiovascular system that delivers oxygen to your muscles more efficiently and effectively. While increased resistance training could lead to increased lean tissue, allowing you to handle greater workloads without suffering physical stress and injury. Without overload, you reach a point where you are no longer making progress in your fitness level. This is not necessarily a bad thing! For example, if you're already in good shape, and you merely want to maintain it, performing your normal workout can help you maintain that fitness level. But overload leads to improvement. Having your body improve its fitness all boils down to how your body perceives the work that it's performing. Here's an example of what I mean. Suppose I could lift a 10-pound dumbbell for 10 repetitions before becoming exhausted. If I performed this same exercise week in and week out, after a while as I got stronger my strength gains through this exercise would start to level off. This same exercise wouldn't challenge my muscles in the same way. As my muscles became used to this workload, my strength would begin to plateau, and in order to continue to improve my strength with this particular exercise I'd want to create an overload.

You can create an overload with either cardiovascular (aerobic) exercise, or resistance training by changing one of several variables. Cardiovascular overloading can occur when you increase either the duration, intensity, or frequency of your aerobic exercise. Increased duration generally refers to how long you exercise --- for instance, adding five minutes to your normal jog or walk. Intensity can be increased by, for example, going faster, or running up an incline --- thus making the same exercise more difficult. And, increased frequency simply means increasing how often you perform the exercise. Overloading your muscular system can be accomplished through increasing the same variables as mentioned above, albeit in some slightly different ways. For instance, increasing the duration could be accomplished by increasing the amount of time you spend lifting weights. While increasing the number of repetitions or sets of repetitions that you perform an exercise, or reducing the amount of time you rest between exercises are both examples of increasing the exercise's intensity. Increasing the frequency of this type of exercise should not be done without due care since with resistance training, you should generally give the exercised muscles a 24-48 hour rest period between workout sessions, before working them again. Safe and effective overloading of your system through progressive exercise is all about making advances in your fitness level. But, a big word of caution here! You should not increase more than one of the variables mentioned above at a time. Then, when your body adjusts to the new workload, you can start making further adjustments.

Safe and effective overloading is important to making gains in your fitness. But because of its potential for injury if not done properly, you should seek the advice of an experienced, knowledgeable, certified personal trainer before planning and making these changes to your exercise routine. Periodically adjusting your exercise routine to incorporate overload can also help you reduce the boredom of performing the same routine over and over again. Properly planned, this can give you a great way to continue to challenge your body at each plateau of your improved fitness.