

Exercise Program Design Part I

Putting together an effective exercise program design is tougher than it may seem. People take different steps when they want to start a program. Some may go to a gym and follow what others are doing, some may go with a friend and do their program, or others may read about a program in a magazine and follow that. There is one major flaw with all of these methods. You aren't doing a program that is specifically made for your situation. An exercise program should focus on your goals, not the goals of a friend or celebrity. This article is the first in a series that will help you put together a customized training program.

So where do you start? You are finally motivated to go to the gym and jump right into strength training so you can tone your muscles. Before you get too far you need to have a game plan. The very first thing to consider is, why are you going to the gym? What are your main goals for working out? There are literally hundreds of fitness goals that you can come up with. Are you trying to gain weight and put on some muscles, are you trying to tone up so you can see more definition, or maybe your doctor recommended an exercise program to get your cholesterol levels under control. Whatever your reasons are you need to be honest with yourself. If you just want to look better than focus on a program that makes you look better, there is nothing wrong with that. Depending on what your goals are it will take your program in completely different directions.

Because there are so many different things to train for I will only focus on a few common ones. Now that you have determined your goals you need to figure out how many days can you realistically spend working out and how long can your workout for. Working out a certain number of days per week for a certain number of hours can be more beneficial for particular programs but you might not be able to fit it all in to your schedule. If this is the case then you work with what you can. Generally, you will want to strength train 2-4 days per week and about 45-60 minutes per session. A typical weight loss routine that will show good results will require 2-3 days per week. If you are looking to an increase in size or sport improvement you are looking at 4-6 days per week. Once you determine your frequency of training you are now ready to look at what you need to do while you are at the gym.

You are almost ready to hit the gym but we have a few more things to fill in first. Next, we want to look at the type of routine to do each time you go to workout. This means are you going to work your entire body each time you train or will you focus on specific body parts each time. The less frequent you go to the gym the more you will have to work each time. If you can only go two days a week you would benefit most from two total body workouts. If you can go 4 days a week then you would be able to split your routine up. Your muscles will fully recover from a workout usually in 48-72hrs. You want to work each muscle again after it is recovered. Waiting too long will hamper your gains. This means you should not be resting one muscle group longer than 3 days before working it again. This being said it is a good idea to hit every muscle group at least twice a week. Someone who is looking for weight loss would want to stick mostly to total body workouts each time in the gym. If you are looking for muscle size/tone or sport training you will benefit from splitting your routine. Two common split routines are upper body/lower body or push/push days. Avoid the traditional body building

routine of 1-2 muscle groups per day. Most muscle work together to move your body so you should train them together.

Now that you know how many days you plan on working out and what muscles or movement patterns you want to train each day, next let's look at our sets and repetitions. When developing a program you want it to be progressive. This means you are changing things like the sets and reps as you progress. When you start an exercise program regardless of your main goals you need to focus on the basics. You should be working on your endurance and stability. Condition your body to work the right way before you start loading up the heavy weights. There is plenty of time for that. For the first 4-6 weeks of your program you should focus on 2-3 sets of 15-20 repetitions. The purpose of this stage is to build the base for the rest of the program. After you have mastered this endurance phase you can now shift more into a muscle building/strength routine. Now we can increase the sets and lower the reps. You might have heard you should lift light weights for more reps to tone up and lift heavy weights to build size. This isn't exactly true. What is the point of lifting light weights? Weights should be heavy so you can build as much muscle as you can and burn as much fat as you can. If you are worried about bulking up don't. If you are looking to just tone you won't be following the same meal plan as someone who is trying to bulk up so it will be very difficult to increase your size. Besides you will only be performing this type of routine for a few weeks and will not have the change to bulk up. For this phase you will focus on 3-4 sets of 8-12 reps. Following this phase you are ready for more advanced exercises and power training. This involves Olympic type lifting and plyometrics. This will usually involve more than 4 sets but less than 8 reps of each exercise. Depending on your main goal you may focus on one phase more than the other. If you are looking for weight loss you will stay most of the time in phase one and a few weeks in the strength and power phase. If you can cycle through a routine like this you will see fast results and avoid plateaus.

This may seem like a lot of information for a workout but an exercise program should be very detailed. You want to program to be customized for you and you want it to be effective. Start with the basics and move on when you are ready. Do not progress until you can perform the essentials. If you can't do a push up then you should be practicing them before you try and bench press. Here is an example program and progression:

Stage 1:

2 sets of each exercise for 20 reps
Push Ups
DB Lunges
Standing Cable Rows
Stability Ball Squats with Curls
Plank Hold 1 minute hold

Stage 2:

3 sets of each exercise for 12 reps
DB Flat Bench
Barbell Squats
Pull ups

Step ups
Hanging Knee Raises

Stage 3:

6 sets of 6 reps
DB Snatches
Clap Push ups
Barbell Push Press
Renegade Rows
Sit ups with a Med Ball Throw

In the next article we will discuss what types of exercises you should be performing, what order to do them, and how to put them together.