

Take it one step at a time

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Can someone really get in shape by simply using stairs?

That's the first question people ask me when I suggest going to do a stair workout, and the answer is yes.

As a trainer I am always trying to come up with interesting ways to make exercise more fun. Stair climbing is a low-impact alternative to running that will work out your butt and thighs, as well as getting your heart and lungs pumping. Compared to jogging or cycling at a moderate pace, stair climbing is more challenging, allowing you to burn more calories in the same amount of time, up to 300 in just 30 minutes. Or you can accumulate 30 minutes of climbing by breaking it up into two or three sessions lasting 10 to 15 minutes each.

The stairs are for anyone interested in improving aerobic fitness, anaerobic conditioning, muscular strength, power and flexibility.

Stair climbing has proven to be such an incredible conditioning tool for not only me but many of my clients. If you are familiar with the Stair-master or Step-mill at your fitness centre you know what an incredible workout it can be. However, I believe nothing compares to what "real" stair climbing has to offer. Depending on where you live, you can do your stair-climbing workout indoors in your apartment building, in your office building or outside. I am a fan of outdoor stair workouts, especially this time of year to enjoy the nice summer weather. Stair climbing can be an intense activity both for the heart and leg muscles because you are carrying your body weight against gravity. It is low impact and safe for the knee joints if you don't do too much too soon, and you do not have any existing knee problems that may be aggravated.

If you run the stairs rather than walk, it intensifies both the caloric burn and the cardiovascular benefits. And the impact on your knees and feet is relatively low, with pressure of two times your body weight as opposed to three or four times when running. But I never recommend running down as it is too jarring on the knees.

STARTING OUT

If you have just begun to climb stairs for exercise -- you may find yourself out of breath after a few flights or you may find your thigh muscles are "burning." To help your muscles and heart adjust safely, climb two flights of stairs then march in place at the stair landing for a few minutes. Climb another two flights and walk around or march in place again, etc. You should do this for only 10 to 15 minutes the first week. Add another five minutes every week. Eventually you will be able to climb all the flights of stairs without having to walk around the floor or march in place at the landing to regain your breath. There is more stress to your knees coming down the stairs than there is climbing up because your muscles and connective tissue are being used as "brakes" as your body goes toward the pull of gravity. Take it slowly on the way down to protect your knees.

PROPER POSTURE

Proper climbing posture means leaning forward slightly from the hips with the back straight. At no time should you be rounded in the lower back area.

Look forward, keeping your eye on the stairs from time to time without looking down with a bent head the whole time. Avoid over-straightening your knees as you climb up. Place your whole foot on the step. Avoid climbing with your heels hanging off the edge because you can injure your Achilles tendon, which connects your calf to your heel.

CLIMB SAFELY

Wear good supportive shoes. The best would be "cross-training" or aerobic shoes. Drink water before, during and after the sessions. Danger signals of doing too much are hyperventilation, a very red flushed face, dizziness, nausea, disorientation, heart palpitations, etc. Also pay attention to how your knees and lower back feel after a few weeks of starting a stair-climbing program. To prevent overuse

injuries caused by repetitively doing the same activity, try alternating days of stair climbing with another activity.

"TOTAL BODY"

A time-efficient "total body" program can be set up using intervals of two or three minutes of stair climbing with one minute of resistance training. Exercises for specific muscle groups can be done on the stair landings using your own body weight. Push-ups against the step, triceps dips, lunging up the steps, hopping, and taking two at a time are just some of the resistance moves you can do to challenge yourself. Take along a lightweight, inexpensive set of exercise rubber bands and you have your own outdoor fitness facility.

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