

“Miximize” Your Cardio with Interval Training

The benefits of cardiovascular exercise are well understood. To name a few, these include fat loss, lowered blood pressure, improved cholesterol profile, better blood sugar balance, reduced depression and even improved sleep. However, did you know you can squeeze even more benefits out of your workouts by simply incorporating intervals? These can include improved fitness levels, better post exercise fat burn, and augmented endorphin release leading to the elusive “exercise high”. Intervals can also help add variety to a monotonous routine, and even spark new weight loss during plateaus.

What is an interval?

In an exercise sense, it is a brief period of time where you increase the intensity to go beyond the aerobic zone. Cardio workouts should generally be done at a conversational pace (i.e. able to talk to someone while exercising). Intervals, however, should push you above this zone. You should feel like you couldn't sustain this intensity for very long. The interval is followed by an easy period, or “recovery”. This allows the heart rate to come back down in to the aerobic zone. The process is then repeated.

How can intervals be incorporated into a cardio session?

No matter what your current ability or fitness level is, there are ways to mix it up and maximize (hence the word “miximize”) your workouts so the beneficial returns will be even greater. The most important thing is to be smart and safe about it. As with all workouts, a proper easy warm up of 5 min should be done beforehand. Always listen to your body. If you feel that you need a longer recovery or a shorter, less intense interval, then so be it, particularly if you are new to exercising. Lastly, consult with your physician periodically to make sure you are medically fit to exercise at higher intensities.

Try these three methods of interval training:

- 1) Fartlek Training** – this method is the easiest to do because it requires no time keeping, but generally works only for those exercising outdoors. The term “fartlek” is a Swedish term that literally means “speed play”. Choose a number of intervals you'd like to incorporate into your workout. Then simply complete them by picking a spot or object in the distance and increasing your speed to get to it. Recover until you feel conversational again. Repeat. Choose objects of varying distances to change up your interval lengths.
- 2) Standard “Timed” Intervals** – this method uses specifically timed periods, therefore a stopwatch is necessary. Generally, the longer time interval will be at an easy, or recovery pace, and the shorter interval at a high, close to maximal effort intensity. A very basic example would be

splitting a 3 min block into 2 min easy and 1 min hard. This is a great method for gym goers who use treadmills and other cardio machines. Incline can be used in place of speed for walkers.

- 3) **“Build” Intervals** – this is a more complex method of #2 which involves an easy interval, a moderate interval and a hard interval. So in essence, the intensity builds through out the time block. A basic example (4min time block): 2 min easy, 1 min moderate and 1 hard.

Sample Interval Workouts

Assuming a cardio session of 30 min, here are some examples of incorporating intervals using the three methods. For longer sessions, simply add more repetitions of the intervals/time blocks.

Fartlek Method:

- 5 min easy warm up.
- 50 yd interval (pick a tree, or a street sign that appears to be about half a football field away), recover until comfortable breathing returns.
- 100 yd interval (choose an object double the distance of the first interval), recover.
- 25 yd interval, recover.
- 50 yd interval, recover.
- *Repeat for 20 min.
- 5 min easy cool down.

Standard Timed Method:

- 5 min easy warm up.
 - 2 min easy to moderate
 - 1 min hard
 - 5 min easy cool down (I know, this adds up to 31 min—so sorry!).
- x 7 Reps

Build Interval Method:

- 5 min easy warm up.
 - 2 min easy to moderate
 - 1 min moderate to hard
 - 1 min hard (max)
 - 5 min easy cool down.
- x 5 Reps