

REVIVE YOUR WORKOUT

get your body back

No need to beat yourself up for taking a break from working out. Instead, focus on the ways to bounce your body back into shape — no matter how long you've been out of it

Sarah Tuff

Some comebacks — like leg warmers and TV dance contests — should stay packed up in the past.

But your prime-time return to the gym is different. Slipping back into a fitness routine after a break can be daunting, especially when you consider that such breaks can cause you to lose up to 50 percent of your lean muscle mass and cardiovascular strength. "As soon as you stop participating in regular activity, your body starts detraining," says Lynn Millar, Ph.D., a professor of physical therapy at Andrews University in Michigan. "But if you were fairly fit before the break, you'll bounce back quickly, because your muscular patterns were more deeply etched." Whether you've been planted on your butt for 2 weeks or 2 years, *WH* has tips to help you ease it and the rest of your body up off the couch and back into your routine.

Your Break: 2 Weeks

Loss of muscle strength: up to 12 percent

Loss of aerobic endurance: 7 percent

Comeback time: 1 week

What Happened

Luckily, not too much. Your loss of muscular strength means that you can probably still do your standard sets of biceps curls, but you'll feel the burn earlier in your repetitions, says New York City athletic trainer Gene Schafer. Your ticker's a bit slower, too. "You've lost some of your endurance because your heart has not been stimulated to be efficient," says Mary Mundrane-Zweiacher, an athletic trainer in Dover, Delaware. "So if you were running 5 miles a day before the break, you might now get winded at the 4-mile mark instead of the end."

Get It Back

You haven't lost much in terms of your fitness level, so you just need to step back and make a few small tweaks to your routine to get back on track. Here's how:

Hit pause Allow for 10 extra seconds to recover between sets. "This will allow your heart rate, which isn't quite at its normal level, to lower enough to give you a better next set, with better technique," Schafer says. "So you'll be able to complete your routine and see results faster."

Focus on power muscles After a 2-week break, your glutes and quads are still strong enough to tackle tough exercise, Mundrane-Zweiacher says. "Squats, lunges, and stepups will set muscle fibers firing and rebuilding fast — without risking injury," she says. Working such a large muscle group will also get you back into a high-calorie-burning mode. Run up a flight of steps (the longer the better) and at the top, stand with your feet shoulder-width apart and squat until your knees reach 90 degrees. Do three reps and then walk back down the stairs. Do three sets of stairs and squats for the first 3 days of your return to exercise.

Go free Since you've lost some muscle but still have enough strength to stabilize what you have, use free weights instead of machines to work more muscle groups at once, Schafer says. If you feel a little flabby (your muscles might not be as tight now as they were before), do some extra sets of light, high-rep toning exercises for your arms and thighs: Holding a 5-pound dumbbell in each hand, with palms down, slowly raise your arms until they're parallel with the floor. Do three sets of 15 reps. For your thighs, do three sets of 15 lunges with a 5-pound dumbbell in each hand.

Do music intervals Intervals will crank up your rate of return by requiring your body to adapt to different speeds, explains Laura Keller, a physical therapist with the Stone Clinic in San Francisco. "You'll probably be returning at a slightly lower level of speed and endurance due to the 2-week break, and intervals help your heart retrain faster than running at one steady pace," says Jim Rutberg of Carmichael Training Systems in Colorado Springs, Colorado. Use your MP3 player for music tempos: After a 10-minute warmup jog, run fast for one song and at a slower pace for the next one. Continue this for at least five songs, or listen to a radio station for 30 to 60 minutes, running at a medium pace during songs and alternating sprinting and walking through commercials.

Your Break: 2 Months

Loss of muscle strength: 35 percent **Loss of aerobic endurance:** 18 percent

Comeback time: 6 weeks

What Happened

The extra project you took on led not only to stress acne and late-night Chow Ming dinners, but also to a significant loss of your fitness base. "Your muscles haven't been fatigued lately, so your first workout back may actually feel pretty good, but then your performance is going to go downhill fast," Rutberg says. "Plus, you've lost a considerable amount of your range of motion, so even doing a simple biceps curl can put you at risk for injury." And after 2 months off of cardiovascular workouts, getting back on the elliptical trainer for 45 minutes is going to feel like climbing the Statue of Liberty. "Your lungs are not as efficient at pumping oxygen to your blood, and your heart is not as efficient at pumping blood to your muscles," says Ann Trombley, an Olympic mountain biker and physical therapist in Boulder, Colorado. "Therefore your fuel supply — oxygen — is low. It's like running out of gas in your car; you're going to chug and sputter."

• What Happened

The extra project you took on led not only to stress acne and late-night Chow Ming dinners, but also to a significant loss of your fitness base. "Your muscles haven't been fatigued lately, so your first workout back may actually feel pretty good, but then your performance is going to go downhill fast," Rutberg says. "Plus, you've lost a considerable amount of your range of motion, so even doing a simple biceps curl can put you at risk for injury." And after 2 months off of cardiovascular workouts, getting back on the elliptical trainer for 45 minutes is going to feel like climbing the Statue of Liberty. "Your lungs are not as efficient at pumping oxygen to your blood, and your heart is not as efficient at pumping blood to your muscles," says Ann Trombley, an Olympic mountain biker and physical therapist in Boulder, Colorado. "Therefore your fuel supply — oxygen — is low. It's like running out of gas in your car; you're going to chug and sputter."

• Get It Back

You'll need to cut back on your old intensity and slowly build your fitness over the 6-week period, which is actually the length of a solid strength-building cycle. Modifying both your cardio and strength exercises will help you gradually ramp your routine up to where it was before you stopped working out. Schedule at least three workouts each week, and revise your old plan like this:

Play quarters And we don't mean at the local frat house. Do one-fourth the cardio you were doing before the break, which will help prevent overexertion yet still ease you back into shape, Keller says. "If you were previously cycling for 2 hours, ride for 30 to 45 minutes, three times a week, and increase by 15 minutes each week," she says. If you were jogging for 1 hour on the treadmill, cut your session back to 15 minutes, adding more minutes each week.

Push up your strength Because your pectoral and arm muscles are weaker, you're at much greater risk for injuring them if you drop and give us military-style pushups, Mundrane-Zweiacher says. On your first day back, do as many modified pushups (with your knees on the floor) as you can. Do them three times a week, and when you can do 30, switch to military style. If you can't do 30, finish the set with modified pushups. This move builds muscle quickly in a safer way than the classic and uses nothing but your body weight; you're less likely to injure yourself doing a pushup than trying to maneuver weights.

Get with the band You're more likely to be sloppy and hurt yourself if you use free weights right away, Schafer says. "Resistance bands will help you quickly regain the strength you've lost without causing an injury, because they keep you in place much like machines do. But the resistance depends on how hard you pull, so they're gentler." Work both your upper and lower body with the bent-leg deadlift band curl in "Priceless Strength" (page 73), or do skier pulls: Shut the band into a door and step back until it just starts to pull. Squat facing the door, and as you lower your body, pull the band to your sides and behind you.

Be partial The muscles on the insides of your knees might be weaker than the ones on the outsides, because your IT bands (the tendons on the outsides of your thighs) tighten with inactivity. As a result, you start using your muscles differently, according to Mundrane-Zweiacher. That puts you at risk for knee problems, and jumping back into regular squats could make that risk higher. For the first 2 weeks, do partial squats by standing with your feet shoulder-width apart and bending your knees to 45 degrees.

Your Break: 2 Years

Loss of muscle strength: Up to 50 percent

Loss of aerobic endurance: Up to 50 percent

Comeback Time: 12 weeks

• What Happened

Seriously. What happened? Unfortunately, you could be half the woman you used to be, even if your jeans size has doubled. "After a 2-year hiatus from weight training, lifting a 10-pound dumbbell is going to feel like lifting a 30-pound one because your muscle fibers have shrunk," Trombley says. Your body will feel softer, and your butt could feel sore after climbing the two flights to your apartment.

• Get It Back

Considering you flexed your intelligence more than your muscles for 2 years (well, let's hope so), a 3-month retraining period really isn't that bad. Pamela Peeke, M.D., author of *Body for Life for Women*, recommends building onto your routine in a pyramid format to avoid overstressing yourself too quickly. For example, in strength training, start with a set of 15 reps. Add 2 pounds for the next set and cut it back to 12 reps. To ease into your cardio routine, crank the resistance on a bike up a level each week. One warning: If after a few weeks you feel like you've been hit by a bus, don't sweat it. "You might feel exhausted, because your body's not used to building new muscle," Dr. Millar says. "But your energy level will improve after about a month."

Psych up It might be harder to stick with your routine now, since it's essentially brand new again. California sport psychologist Jim Taylor suggests hiring help. Personal trainers boost motivation, according to studies by the American Council on Exercise. Shell out for several sessions in advance, so if you skip your workout, you'll feel not only an extra inch on your waistline — but a pinch on your wallet.

Go hard core Your core is the center of your fitness universe, and at this point you'll need to rebuild it. Try Mundrane-Zweiacher's 90-90 holds. Lie on your back with your spine in a neutral (neither arched nor rounded) position, with your abs pulled tight. Next, lift your feet so that your knees and hips are both at a sharp 90 degrees. On day one, hold it for 10 seconds, then add 10 seconds each day until you reach 2 minutes.

Walk away You're more prone to shin splints and a sore back because of possible muscle imbalances, and walking is one of the gentlest ways to work those muscles evenly while easing your cardiovascular system back into shape, Keller says. Plus, a recent University of Texas at Austin study showed that walking for just 30 minutes relieves depression, providing the same pick-me-up some people seek in Krispy Kremes. Keller suggests doing 2-mile walks three times a week for 3 to 4 weeks. After a month of walking, alternate between walking and running for another month, which will help your body adjust more slowly to the demands of running. After 6 weeks of total exercise, start adding mileage to your runs and picking up the pace.