

What You're Skipping at the Gym, and Shouldn't Be

Going to the gym to meet with a personal trainer, take a class or pump iron on your own often takes a great deal of self-motivation. Thinking about engaging in five to 15 minutes of warming up and cooling down before and after your main routine takes even more!

But both are *extremely* important, and it's my aim in this post to make you a little more excited about them.

I'll be completely honest with you: Warm-ups and cool-downs are definitely not my favorite parts of fitness. I mean, when I walk into a gym or CrossFit box, I don't want to waste a second; I want to start lifting weights, jumping on boxes, swinging kettlebells and pulling myself up on bars immediately! Jogs, lunges, sit-ups and skips as well as myriad other drills that compose a temperature-raising, muscle-pumping "dynamic warm-up" are dusty, dry Old English poems in comparison to high-intensity workouts and sports activities, which are more like riveting Stephen King page-turners ... or the latest Marvel superhero movie, if reading's not your thing.

But alas, poetry-dodgers, warm-ups are ever so necessary and in fact offer several likable features, such as:

- Elevated body temperature
- Increased blood flow in the muscles
- Improved efficient cooling
- Improved range of motion
- Reduced incidence and likelihood of musculoskeletal injuries
- Supplied adequate blood flow to heart
- Provided rehearsal of movements present in the workout

- Help to prepare mentally for the main workout

And cool-downs, comprising various static stretches and mobility exercises, are equally as important as their pre-workout counterpart. A few benefits include:

- Bringing your breathing, heart rate, and body temperature slowly back to normal
- Aiding in the dissipation of waste produce, like lactic acid
- Helping to reduce soreness in the following days
- Reducing the chances of dizziness brought on by blood pooling at the extremities

Can't wait to get started? Good—I was hoping you'd say that!

Now I'd like to share with you my favorite warm-up and cool-down routines for preparing for and recovering from a full-body, weight-training workout (there are specific, specialized exercises for long-distance runners, sprinters, discus-throwers, etc.).

Warm-Up, Part 1:

Note: I recommend completing the following portion of the warm-up before every weight-training workout because it effectively improves range of motion, activates muscles fibers and increases blood flow. The next section will vary depending on the specific muscle groups you'll be training on a particular day.

Perform this series five times:

- 10 walking lunges
- 15 jumping jacks
- 5 push-ups (either the modification on your knees or the standard version on your toes in a plank position)
- 10 squats
- 5 sit-ups

Warm-Up, Part 2

Now move to your free weights and/or machines you'll be using for your individual workout. Before jumping into your routine, perform 6 to 8 repetitions of your first planned exercise with 50 percent of what you can do for a single repetition. Rest about 30 seconds, and then grab a heavier weight (about 70 percent of what you can do for a single repetition), and perform 4 to 6 repetitions. Using lighter weights before the main event (the "gun show," if it's biceps day!) wakes up your muscles and informs them of their task ahead.

Repeat this pattern for every new muscles group that will be targeted in your workout.

That's it! Not so bad, was it? Your body will thank you for preparing it so thoroughly, I promise.

Now on to the cool-down ...

Cool-Down, Part 1

Note: There's a reason we didn't do any yoga-type stretches in the warm-up—your muscles weren't warm! Now that you're nice and warm from your tough workout and preceding warm-up, your muscles are elastic and pliable, ready for static stretches. Yay! The following section contains stretches that I love to do after just about every workout.

Perform the following sequence of stretches, holding each for 10 to 20 seconds:

Hip/Glute

- Lie on your back and cross your left foot over your right knee.
- Grasp hands behind right thigh and gently pull thigh towards you, keeping the body relaxed.
- Hold, then switch sides.

Hamstrings

- Sit on the floor and extend one leg out straight.
- Bend the other leg at the knee and position the sole of that foot against your opposite inner thigh.
- Extend your arms and reach forward over the straight leg by bending at the waist as far as possible.
- Hold, then switch legs.

Inner Thigh

- Sit on the floor with feet pressed together.
- Keep abs pulled in as you lean forward.
- Keep leaning until you feel a nice stretch in your inner thighs.

Chest and shoulders

- Standing, interlock fingers behind your back, arms straight.
- Keeping hands together, lift them as high as you comfortably can.

Upper back

- Clasp your hands together in front of your chest, arms straight.
- Round your back towards the floor, pressing your arms away from your body to feel a stretch in your upper back.

Triceps

- Standing, bend your right elbow behind your head and use your left hand to gently pull the right elbow in further until you feel a stretch in the back of your arm (tricep).
- Hold, then switch sides.

Spine twist

- Lie on the floor and place your right foot on left knee.
- Using your left hand, gently pull your right knee towards the floor, twisting your spine, keeping hips and shoulders on the floor, left arm straight out.

Well, that's a wrap! I hope you all have a new appreciation for the unpopular, often overlooked facets of fitness. I'm confident that after a week of warming up and cooling down consistently, you'll find yourself having more productive workouts and better recovery periods afterward.

If you'd like full workout routines, check out my book *Fit for Faith: A Christian Woman's Guide to Total Fitness*.

"I can't wait to get to the gym and warm up! Ooh! And then that cool-down. ... That's icing on the cake!"—said no one, ever.

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