

7 Muscle-Building Mistakes to Avoid

By: Myatt Murphy

You've put in the time. The sweat. Maybe the tears when you don't see results. Quit blubbering. It'll be fine.

Entering the weight room is the first step toward building muscle, but it's not the last. What you do before, during, and after a workout can either negate your hard work or elevate your growth to a new level.

"Your personal habits, your social life, even which exercises you choose to do can take away from what you're trying to build," says Jeff Bell, C.S.C.S., an exercise physiologist and the owner of Spectrum Wellness in New York City. Bell and other experts helped us pinpoint seven factors that sabotage results. "Add them up and they could be why your muscles have nothing to show for all your time served," Bell says.



Eliminate these seven saboteurs, then watch your muscles grow—with nothing holding them back.

Skiping Basics

Plenty of lifters believe that doing isolation exercises like chest flies and leg extensions is the only way to make their muscles grow. But basic moves such as bench presses and squats force several muscle groups to work together, imposing more stress on your body for bigger gains.

"Your body reacts to all that stress by having the anterior pituitary gland issue more growth hormone to compensate for the extra effort," says Allen Hedrick, C.S.C.S., head strength-and-conditioning coach at the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs. Of course you need variation, but don't abandon basic moves in favor of intermediate isolation exercises.

Fix it: Write down the exercises in your routine to see what percentage of them are compound moves. "If it's not in the range of at least 40 to 50 percent, then you're doing too many isolation exercises," says Bell.

Lunchtime Hoops

Playing sports too often can sidetrack your muscle-growth goals. Muscles typically need 48 hours of rest to adapt to the stresses placed on them during

exercise. "Engaging in extra activity also makes your body more likely to use any excess calories it has for fuel, and not for rebuilding itself," says Bell.

Fix it: "Pull your cardiovascular activity back to the bare minimum—20 minutes, three times a week—to see what effect it has on your body," Bell says. If cardio is indeed stealing your muscle, you should begin to notice strength improvements—being able to lift more weight or complete more repetitions—within 2 to 3 weeks. If your primary goal is to increase muscle size and strength, and not necessarily to build your overall health, try pulling back further. Can't miss a game? During your workout, ease up on the muscles you use most in your extra activity so they have more time to recover.

Smoking and Drinking

You know smoking is stupid. You know you're gambling with cancer, stroke, and other health issues. But did you know you're also sabotaging your strength training?

"Smoking places carbon monoxide in your system, which prevents your muscles from getting as much oxygen to use for energy," says Scott Swartzwelder, Ph.D., a clinical professor of medical psychology at Duke University. "The less oxygen your muscles have to draw from, the less efficient they are at contracting, which can limit their capacity for work."

As for alcohol, it can cover your abs with a layer of lard and interfere with hormones that help build them. "Drinking alcohol on a regular basis can also keep your testosterone levels lower than usual and decrease muscle mass," says Swartzwelder.

Fix it: Quit smoking, and don't worry about becoming a cold-turkey butterball. "Getting in at least 30 minutes of exercise three or four times a week not only helps control body weight, but can also produce positive psychological effects that might diminish the need to smoke," says Swartzwelder. Drinking moderately (two drinks or less per day) won't harm testosterone levels and can actually improve your cardiovascular health, he says.

Starvation

You need to eat after your workout. Right after a session, your body is hustling to convert glucose into glycogen so your muscles can repair themselves and grow. "If you don't eat after exercise, your body breaks down muscle into amino acids to convert into glucose," says John Ivy, Ph.D., chairman of kinesiology at the University of Texas.

Fix it: After you work out, eat a high-carbohydrate meal—and don't forget the protein. A study in the *Journal of Strength and Conditioning Research* found that

a four-to-one carbohydrate-to-protein ratio can provide 128 percent greater muscle-glycogen storage than a high-carbohydrate drink alone. (They used Endurox R Recovery Drink in the study.) For even greater results, have a sports drink before and during exercise.

Craig Ferguson

If you don't get enough deep sleep, your muscles can't recover. Moreover, says Catherine Jackson, Ph.D., chairwoman of the department of kinesiology at California State University at Fresno, when you work out on insufficient sleep, you exercise at a lower intensity than you realize—but you feel as if it's high. So your muscles are less likely to receive enough stress to grow.

Fix it: Go to bed and wake up at set times every day, even on weekends, to keep your sleep cycles regular. Avoid caffeine—and perhaps exercise—for 4 to 6 hours before bedtime. Elevating your heart rate before bed can interfere with sleep, Jackson says.

Sugar

Sugary drinks like soda can fool your body with a blood-sugar spike, making you prone to skip "other, nutrient-dense foods you could be eating," says Bell. If your sugar habit limits your intake of muscle-building amino acids, it will sap the fuel you need for your workouts, says New York City-based celebrity trainer Steve Lischin, M.S., C.P.T.

Fix it: Water and low-sugar sports drinks are your best bets. But sugar hides elsewhere. "Watch out for dried fruits, certain nutrition bars, and even ketchup," Lischin says.

Thirst

For the active man, eating about a gram of protein for every 2.2 pounds of body weight helps build muscle—if the protein is processed correctly. "A high-protein meal has a slight diuretic effect," says Lischin. When the body uses protein for energy, it has to remove the nitrogen component of the molecule to turn it into glucose. "This requires plenty of water," he says.

Fix it: Drink eight to 10 glasses of water a day and divide your protein among five or six small meals throughout the day. "Eating an average of 25 to 30 grams each meal is ideal," says Lischin. "Not only will you put less stress on your kidneys, but you'll also utilize more of the protein you're ingesting by giving your body only as much as it can use each time."