

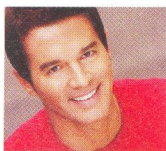
The

Essential exercises

We've zeroed in on the best ways to get fit, flexible and strong **By Erin Phelan**

For optimum results when working out, it's a must to include cardiovascular, strength and flexibility training each week. But what are the key exercises? A survey of 17,000 personal trainers by the American Council on Exercise determined seven essentials for your fitness program. Best Health assembled a panel of prominent fitness professionals and asked them why you need to do these tried-and-true exercises. (As always, check with your doctor before starting any fitness program.) →

PANEL OF EXPERTS *We consulted with some of the world's most prominent fitness experts*



Geoff Bagshaw is a personal trainer and award-winning fitness speaker based in Vancouver.



Jay Blahnik is an award-winning personal trainer from California, and a Nike product and programming consultant.



Frederic Delavier, based in France, is a personal trainer and the author of *Strength Training Anatomy*.



Sherri McMillan is a personal trainer and the owner of North-West Personal Training in Washington state.



Harley Pasternak is a California-based celebrity personal trainer and best-selling author of *5-Factor Fitness* and *5-Factor Diet*.



Lee Scott is a walking coach and personal trainer based in Toronto, and the founder of WoW Power Walking.



Helen Vanderburg is a personal trainer, and president of Heavens Fitness Club and Fusion Fitness Training in Calgary.

Cardiovascular

Walking

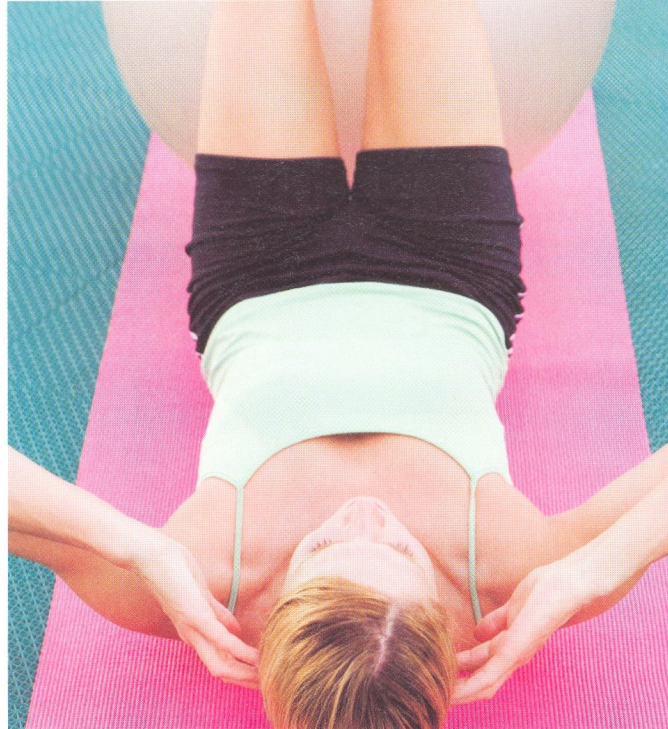
WHY IT'S ESSENTIAL Walking has been shown in studies to be associated with many health benefits, including lower rates of heart disease, stroke and type 2 diabetes. As well, studies found walking just 30 minutes a day, a few days a week, boosted bone density in women.

TECHNIQUE AND TIPS Walking should be brisk (typically 5-6 km/h for most people—not strolling), and challenging enough that you feel a little out of breath but can still carry on a conversation. “I encourage walkers to clench their glutes as they walk, and to engage muscles in their upper back to get a better workout and a faster speed. This will also improve posture,” says Lee Scott.

SWITCH IT UP “One great way to train is to do speed intervals,” Scott says. “Start with 30 seconds of speeding up, then 45 seconds of recovery. Repeat that 10 times.” The next week, shorten your recovery time. Then the week after that, try hill repeats. “And change up your walking terrain to prevent injury,” she says.

Running

WHY IT'S ESSENTIAL “Running is the gold standard for total calories burned per minute over all other activities,” Jay Blahnik says. The calories you burn vary depending on your body weight and the intensity of your run, but a good rule of thumb is 100 calories per mile (that's 60 calories per kilometre). Says Blahnik, “You don't have to run very far, or very fast, to burn a good amount of calories.”



The American Council on Exercise has determined that the three most effective abdominal exercises are the bicycle crunch, hanging knee raises and stability-ball crunches.

TECHNIQUE AND TIPS Many people avoid running for fear of the impact on knees and joints. “Running gets a bad rap,” says Blahnik. “Yes, there is impact with running; however, in terms of our body's biomechanics, it is a natural movement that we were designed to do. The motion is natural and functional—many machines on the cardio floor take you through movements that are not as natural as running.” To prevent knee injury, make sure you are running in proper shoes that have been fitted by an expert. Mix up the impact by sometimes choosing treadmills over outdoors, and if you're outdoors, head for trails rather than hard surfaces, which have a greater impact on the joints. “You can focus on having a ‘quieter’ running stride—meaning, if you think

about landing softly, you will land more softly,” says Blahnik. Finally, some people have injuries or biomechanical issues that make running more difficult; a sports physician will be able to detect if your legs are properly aligned for the activity. **SWITCH IT UP** Change the landscape, says Blahnik. “Lots of outdoor runners don't like treadmills because they find them boring—but I suggest using them once a week for speed or hill work, adding power and speed to your program.” Conversely, if you are always in the gym, grab your shoes and head outside for a change of scenery. To improve speed, play with a variety of stride lengths. “You'll eventually find the perfect combination of stride length and leg turnover to obtain the fastest, most comfortable speed for

your body,” says Blahnik. And don't rule out intervals (alternating slow and fast speeds). “Interval training does three things: It allows you to go much faster for shorter distances than you could if you ran the same pace the whole time; it helps the overall calorie burn of a workout—fast bursts followed by slow bursts often add up to more calories burned overall; and it reduces the boredom many people feel when they may not like running or are new to it.”

Flexibility

Yoga

WHY IT'S ESSENTIAL Studies show that yoga significantly improves flexibility, balance, and muscular strength and endurance, giving you the ability to exercise longer. Yoga may also help control physiological variables such as blood pressure, respiration and heart rate, and speed up your metabolic rate to help you maintain a healthy weight. There are a number of different styles and types of yoga you can practise, says Helen Vanderburg. “If stress reduction is your goal, a restorative yoga class is good. If you want a tough workout, I recommend either Ashtanga or a fusion fitness class.”

TECHNIQUE AND TIPS “Each yoga posture involves a different focus for the body,” says Vanderburg. The standing postures, she explains, build strength of the legs and core as well as flexibility of the lower body—especially the hamstrings, hip flexors and adductors (inner thighs). Forward bends, back bends and twists work on strength and flexibility of the spine and pelvis as well as the surrounding muscles. Inver-

sions—where the head is below the heart and feet in relation to gravity—have a wide range of benefits for the nervous system. A downward-facing dog yoga pose is a partial inversion, while a headstand is an example of a full inversion.

SWITCH IT UP Vanderburg recommends that you don't stick to just one routine, and says that once you learn the yoga postures, it is easy to do them on your own. "All yoga postures can be done at home. Listen to your body and never go beyond what feels comfortable for you."

Strength-building

The Squat

WHY IT'S ESSENTIAL The squat is rated, time and again, as one of the most effective exercises for toning the legs, including the quadriceps in the front of the thighs, the hamstrings in the back, and the gluteus maximus in the buttocks.

TECHNIQUE AND TIPS "The squat gives different results depending on your body type," says Frederic Delavier. "If you have long limbs, the squat will mainly act on the glutes and lower back; if you have shorter limbs, it will work the quadriceps muscles more."

Here's the basic squat technique: Stand with feet hip width apart with a chair behind you. Slowly lower your hips as if you are about to sit, but just before your body touches the chair, return slowly to a standing position. Keep your back straight, and try not to let your knees go past your toes. "If you have knee or joint problems, vary the depth of the squat to only a few degrees, and progress gradually," says Sherri McMillan.

SWITCH IT UP A study found

the single-leg squat was a highly effective butt toner. Stand on a step, facing toward the step, with your weight on your left leg and your right foot hanging off the back of the step. Bend the weight-bearing knee and lower your body, pushing your hips back into a semi-seated position. Your knee should not come over the toes, weight should be on the left heel, and shoulders should be square with your hips. To come up, push down through your heel while contracting the glutes. Then switch sides.

The Crunch (or any ab exercise)

WHY IT'S ESSENTIAL Your abdominal muscles increase your overall strength and power, help stabilize your torso and can help alleviate back pain. Abdominal exercises can help strengthen weak parts of the body and take pressure away

from the back. Strong abdominals also help you maintain good posture.

TECHNIQUE AND TIPS The effectiveness of any abdominal exercise will vary from person to person, and will depend on factors such as level of athleticism and past injuries. "It is hard picking one abdominal exercise, because you have to train all three planes of your abdominals—your rectus abdominis [the front abs or "six-pack" abs], your obliques [the sides] and your transversus abdominis [the inner abdominals]," says Harley Pasternak. Your abdominal muscles, like any other muscle group, will need recovery time between workouts.

Pasternak's two-in-one exercise is a crunch with a twist. Lie flat on your back and lift your shoulders off the ground, curling your abdominals. At the top, rotate your left shoulder to the right side, then rotate back to centre and release back to the

floor. Switch sides, and repeat. "You're working your rectus abdominis and your transversus, while flexing and rotating your core," says Pasternak.

SWITCH IT UP Vary abdominal exercises with each workout. "During one workout you could do a plank and the next day try straight-leg lifts," suggests McMillan. For the plank, lie flat on your stomach on the floor, raising up onto your toes and resting on your forearms. Keep your back flat, in a straight line from head to heels, tilt your pelvis and contract your abdominals to prevent your glutes from sticking up in the air. Hold for 30 to 60 seconds.

For a straight-leg lift, lie flat on your back and lift one leg up into the air, then slowly lower it. Repeat the lift with the other leg. Also try double-leg lifts.

The Lunge

WHY IT'S ESSENTIAL

Research shows that lunges rival squats as the ultimate lower-body exercise to tone glutes, quadriceps and hamstrings.

TECHNIQUE AND TIPS To do a basic lunge, take one step forward and drop your rear knee almost to the floor, making sure to keep the front heel on the floor and that knee directly over the centre of that foot. Slowly return to a standing position. Repeat with the other leg. "I like the lunge because it is a multi-joint exercise," says Pasternak. "The fact that the lunge involves your glutes, quads and hamstrings means there is a lot of synergy in your lower body. This is a great leg strengthener."

SWITCH IT UP Pasternak recommends incorporating a variety of lunges into your program, and changing them weekly. He has a favourite: walking lunges. →

"A proper balance of training your whole body and constantly changing the exercises is essential," says Harley Pasternak, author of *5-Factor Fitness* and *5-Factor Diet*.



Do a standard lunge, but instead of coming back to a standing position, bring the rear leg forward with a giant step. “You can increase the number of steps taken, or go up an incline to increase the difficulty,” he says.

The Push-up

WHY IT'S ESSENTIAL The push-up requires no equipment, and conditions the chest, shoulders and triceps, while demanding core-muscle activation.

“With push-ups you are using your own body weight and targeting a number of different muscles, giving you a lot of bang for your buck,” says McMillan.

TECHNIQUE AND TIPS “Push-ups are easy to modify, making them a great exercise from beginner to expert,” says Geoff Bagshaw. If you’re a beginner, lie on your stomach with your hands set slightly wider than your shoulders. Push your upper body off the floor, maintaining a straight line from head to toes (or, if you can’t manage that, from head to knees). “If you can, try to start out by doing it from the toes, and see how many repetitions you can do before dropping to your knees,” says Bagshaw.

SWITCH IT UP Put your hands close together (less than shoulder width apart) to target the triceps. For advanced push-ups, McMillan suggests decline push-ups (feet on a bench or stability ball, hands on the floor). □

Find all you need to know about running—and read inspiring stories from other Canadian women—at besthealthmag.ca/running.



IT WORKED FOR ME!

I GOT FIT THANKS TO A PERSONAL TRAINER

By Debbie Sorensen

Growing up in Calgary, I was always active, so I never had a problem with my weight. After moving out on my own, however, everything changed: I ate more fast food and my exercise habits were virtually non-existent. I didn’t pay attention to my gradual increase in weight until a friend commented on how much I had gained. So I started working out on my own, drastically cut back on what I was eating and lost the extra pounds. Then I became pregnant, and the whole cycle started again. Even though I continued to exercise, I also continued to overeat. I was slowly putting on more weight.

In February 2008, the company where I was working closed, so I grabbed the opportunity to take some time off and get myself back into shape. I started out by going faithfully to a gym,

but began skipping classes when I didn’t see results quickly enough. It was an uphill battle: My biggest challenge was not a physical one, as my body adapted quickly, but a mental one. Self-doubt truly made me my own worst enemy.

Then last June, my gym announced an 11-week body makeover challenge that included help from a personal trainer and a nutrition expert. I signed up.

During our first meeting, trainer Brett Swindells took my measurements, weight and the dreaded “before” photos. Then the work began. Three times a week, we met to do weight training and cardio exercises, and, on his advice, I did cardio workouts an additional three times per week on my own. Brett monitored my progress and pushed me harder than I would ever have pushed myself. He constantly challenged me by increasing the weight I was training with and showed me new exercises that kept me from getting bored. As my body changed, I became even more driven to continue my quest. I had to believe in myself and know that I could accomplish anything I set my mind on.

In the meantime, nutritionist Dawn Hart helped me develop an eating plan based on the foods I enjoyed. My former diet was basically healthy, but my portions were out of control and I loved potato chips and beer—those had to go! By eating healthy amounts of proteins and carbohydrates, I started feeling full and lost my cravings. Between my exercise and diet, the weight and inches started to disappear. And having someone monitoring my progress helped keep me on track.

By the end of the body makeover competition, I had lost 25 pounds and a grand total of 15 inches—back to the body I had 17 years ago—and I was the winner! Now I have lots more energy and more zest for life. Exercise and healthy eating are my lifestyle, and I can’t see myself ever regaining that weight.

It was working with Brett that really brought me to my goal. I still work with him three times a week, as I won 52 personal training sessions as part of my prize. But I also plan on training with him regularly once the free sessions run out.

A time comes when we need to put ourselves at the top of our priority list. We all have the power to succeed if we stay focused on our ultimate goals.

Debbie Sorensen, 48, works for a credit union in Calgary.