

21 Ways to Break a Fitness Plateau

Sometimes we hit a plateau with training. No matter how many times you perform an exercise you just aren't getting any stronger or any more results.

Don't panic this is very common. Just by making a few changes to your workout you can burst through plateaus and continue making improvements. Making subtle changes on an ongoing basis will keep your results from plateauing.

1 – Take Time Off

It is very common for people to do too much. Taking an extra days rest or even a week totally off training could be all you need. If you think you may be overtraining, then check back through your training log data to see how much total volume of work per week you've completed for the last 60-90 days. Your best bet is to let your personal trainer check through the volume and give you some ideas on how to modify.

2 – Speed Up

Increasing the speed of your exercise repetitions will make the workout feel totally different. If you are used to exercising at a steady pace start injecting a little speed so rather than squatting at a pace of 2 seconds down and 2 seconds up, try 1 second down and 1 second up. Be careful though, if you are a beginner speeding up an exercise is a quick way to lose form and build up bad habits.

3 – Slow Down

If you are looking to build muscle or are new to exercise slowing down your 'time under tension' will make all the difference. Most people perform their exercise repetitions far too quickly. Why? Because slower reps are far more challenging. If you are performing a push up with a tempo of 1 second down and 1 second up try 3 seconds down and 3 seconds up. Although you will struggle to perform the same amount of reps the rewards will be greater if you are looking to gain muscle.

4 – Rearrange Exercises

Sometimes all you need to spark a fresh change in your body is a switch in the exercise order. As a general rule the most challenging exercises should always be first on the list. So a kettle bell snatch would always be before a push up or squat. Also the most important exercise should always take priority first too. So if you are weak at Lunging but strong at Push Ups you should always perform the Lunges first. Take a look at your workout order and see if you can switch things around a bit.

5 – Negatives

Negatives involve concentrating on the eccentric phase of the exercise. The Eccentric phase is when the muscle is lengthening. So if you think about a Pull Up, the lowering phase is the eccentric part or the negative phase. Sticking with the Pull Up example, to work on the negative phase you would use a chair to help you get into the top position with the bar at chest height and then lower slowly under control for 5 seconds. Be warned negatives will leave you feeling very sore but they are a great way to increase strength during a certain movement.

6 – Partial

Performing just half or a quarter of the exercise can stimulate growth in areas than have not be focused upon before. To perform a partial simply perform only a part of the complete movement. So if you think about a squat you may do 1 full squat followed by 1 half squat. Another example may be one full Chin up followed by half a Chin Up, followed by half a lowering Chin Up. I also use partial movements for rehabilitation in order to tighten up sloppy joints.

7 – Drop Sets

This type of training comes straight from the body building guide book. Drop sets are highly effective but should not be over used because they do cause a lot of muscle tissue damage and so require a lot of recovery. The process is simple, perform say 10 reps with a weight then reduce the weight and perform another 10, then reduce and perform another 10. Continue for 4-8 sets until you cannot take any more and have little weight left to move.

8 – Plyometrics

Explosive training like jumping and throwing movements are classed as plyometric. Jumping onto boxes, off boxes, performing jump squats, slamming a medicine ball, clap push ups or jumping lunges are all plyometric exercises. These are definitely not for the beginner and the chance of injury certainly increases with these types of exercises. However, if you have hit a rut then a few weeks of Plyometric based exercises with some good recovery in between workouts can really help.

9 – Get Functional

How 3 dimensional are your workouts? Have you tried side lunges or Rotational Squats or Push Ups? Most people get stuck in a workout routine that is primarily sagittal or forwards and backwards. In life we don't just move this way. We bend, twist, turn, step, and rotate all over the place. If you have hit a plateau then addressing the direction of your movements can work muscle never trained before. If you usually do forward lunges, try a side lunge instead. Spice up your squats by adding a twist at the top.

10 – Recovery Methods

What do you do once you have finished your workout? Do you eat a meal high in protein and complex carbs? Do you take a cold shower or ice bath? One great way to increase your recovery time is to take a cold shower after your workout. Turn the shower to cold and dive in. If you have just completed a run then try a cold bath. No need for ice just fill the bath with cold water and sit for 5-10 minutes. Changing temperature from cold to warm will help flush toxins from your body and stimulate fresh blood and nutrients.

11 – Nutrition

If you are eating badly then your body will not be getting the fuel and nutrients it requires to grow and improve. If you have hit a plateau then take a look at your nutrition. Do you eat fresh organic food that is full of life or do you poison your body with dead food made in a science lab?

12 – Intervals

If you are performing slow steady cardio in preparation for a 5k or 10k race then getting stuck into some interval training twice per week will seriously improve your time. Try running hard for short periods of up to 2 minutes and then running easy for a while until you have recovered before repeating again. If you are not a runner then you can still perform intervals by working hard at an exercise, say Burpees and then resting for a short period before repeating.

13 – Change Equipment

Try something new to shock your body into change. Have you tried Kettle bell Training, Medicine Ball Exercises, Power Clubs, TRX, Power bags? You can perform exactly the same workouts but with some different equipment and get a totally different response. The way some equipment moves and how your body has to stabilize can be a total game changer.

14 – Single Sided

I once read that we spend 85% of our time on one leg when we are on the move. Do you train yourself with one legged exercises? Have you tried one legged squats or pistols? How about dead lifts with just one leg? How about a single arm press or row? Using just one arm or leg is a lot more challenging, not only for your balance, but for your core and stabilization muscles too. If you are comfortable with an exercise on both feet then try just one and feel the difference. Nothing beats single leg squats for developing shear leg strength and power.

15 – Instability

When we move around the ground is very rarely flat. Lumps, bumps and other objects knock us off balance and change our course of direction. If you really want to fire up those small stabilizing muscles and bomb proof your body against injury, then try performing a few exercises on an unstable platform. Stability balls or Exercise Balls are great for challenging your

balance. So is the BOSU and training on a matted floor too. Try performing some forward lunges onto a BOSU and feel the difference that has on your body as it fires up all those stabilizing muscles.

16 – More Reps

As a general rule beginners should start out with 4-6 weeks of high rep training in order to condition connective tissue. Muscle develops much quicker than connective tissue due to its rich blood supply. A course of high reps will protect your soft tissue from future injury. If you have been training for some time then chances are you haven't performed many high rep sets for a while. Grab a good size barbell and perform 20 full squats and just feel the difference that high reps can have. If you have hit a plateau in your Squatting numbers then a few weeks of 20 rep workouts will see you bursting through to new heights.

17 – Less Reps

If you have been training for some time then a series of heavy sets can give you the neurological advantage that you may need. The classic workout of 5 reps x 5 sets is a sure fire winner. Make sure you take 2-3 minutes rest between sets and go for a big compound exercise like Squats or Dead lifts. Limited these types of workouts to 2 times per week due to the huge demands they place on the body.

18 – Challenges

There is nothing like an exercise challenge to enliven the spirit and increase motivation. I have put together a number of using all types of equipment for you to try. Generally fitness challenges require a high number of reps and will leave you totally wiped out for a day or two. But this overload to the system may be just the stimulus you require for a few weeks to get you over a hump.

19 – Change Rest Period

Sometimes we get into a habit and find a comfortable rest period. Grab yourself a timer and shake things up a bit. Chances are you are resting too long between exercises so try knocking a few seconds off and push yourself a little. I'm sure you will feel more out of breath and even perform less reps on your next set but it may be enough to change things for you. If you are working on strength training then you can try resting for a little longer between sets, even up to 5 minutes.

20 – Change when you Exercise

Do you exercise in the evening, afternoon or morning? Hormonally we are best prepared first thing in the morning. If you are training at night and can manage a morning session then give it a whirl. Conversely if you find that you are tired first thing in the morning then try an evening session. Don't forget to get to bed on time so that you get 7-8 hours. Rest is vital for recovery from exercise.

21 – Adjust your Grip

If you are using dumbbells, barbells, or a pulley machine changing your grip can make a vast difference to the muscles used for that exercise. For example have you tried Chin Ups with a parallel grip? or shoulder presses with a hammer grip? or rows with a reverse grip? Take a look at all your regular exercises and see if you can change grip position for a month and see what difference that makes to your strength gains.