Fitness for Couch Potatoes

Tune in and tone up with our TV-watching workout

By Carol Sorgen
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Are you addicted to your TiVo? Never miss an episode of CSI? Got sore thumbs from clicking from one football game to another?

If TV is a must-see for you, it's easy to let it cut into your workout time. But fitness doesn't have to mean foregoing your favorite shows. How about working in a workout in front of the tube? Even fitness experts find TV-watching workouts helpful -- and sometimes, a necessity.

Bob Prichard is so busy with his duties as director of Somax Sports, a training facility in Tiburon, Calif., that he doesn't have a lot of time to exercise. So he's made it a habit to work out whenever he watches TV.

"I have a treadmill set up in my living room and I walk at a brisk, but comfortable pace, while watching a DVD or TV," he says. "This way, I get in one to three hours of exercise per day. (I often watch golf tournaments, baseball games, etc.)"

Kinesiologist Shari Feuz, an exercise advisor with the International Council on Active Aging in Vancouver, says Prichard's approach can work well -- as long as you're working hard enough to feel it.

"It is absolutely possible to improve your fitness level in front of the TV, if the intensity is adequate, just as it is quite possible to go to a fitness center several times per week and NOT improve your fitness level," Feuz says. Given how much TV most of us watch, exercising at the same time is not a bad idea. Studies show that American men average 29 hours a week of TV watching, while women rack up about 34 hours. That gives us a lot of time to fit in some extra activity.

"This is multitasking at its best," says Mare Petras, author of Fitness Simply, which includes a chapter titled "Here's Oprah," dedicated to fitness in front of the TV.

"We're an all-or-nothing society," says Petras. "We think that if we can't
exercise for an hour at a time, that it doesn't count. But that's not true. It doesn't have to be 'black or white' with fitness. It all adds up."

**Don't Touch That Dial**

In fact, if you're not ready to risk losing track of the plot of that fast-moving drama by doing a full-blown workout, you can fit in fitness breaks during the commercials. This can be an especially good option for beginners.

Linda Buch, author of *The Commercial Break Workout*, points out that a 30-minute sitcom has about 10 minutes' worth of commercials. Instead of using this time to reach for a handful of cookies or chips, get moving!

Among Buch's suggestions:
- **Pushups.** If floor pushups are too difficult for you, start off by standing up with your hands on the wall, then pushing back. Do this 10 times; increase the reps as the exercise gets easier.
- **Chair squats.** Stand up, sit down, then stand right back up (for even more of a workout, don't sit down all the way). Do this for the length of one commercial. As it gets easier, do it again for the next commercial.
- **Marching in place.** Move both your arms and legs; add jumping jacks to increase the intensity.

"Little bits of exercise like these strung together add up to energy expended," says Buch.

**Muscle Up**

But don't stop there. You can do many types of strength training in front of the television, says Pat Woellert, fitness instructor at University Fitness at the University of Cincinnati.

Using resistance tubing or dumbbells (or even books, or cans of soup), do upper-body exercises while seated on a chair. Some to try:
- **Bicep curls**
- **Overhead shoulder presses**
- **Side arm raises**
- **Front arm raises**
- **Triceps extensions**

Lying on the floor, do side-lying leg raises for the outer hip and inner thigh, with or without weights. Sitting up on the floor, use resistance bands to do seated rows (pretend you're rowing a boat).
To get the most out of your prime-time workout, do something different every day, suggests Lynne Brick, BSN, president and owner of Brick Bodies and Lynne Brick's Women's Health & Fitness in Baltimore. Fitness pros call this cross-training. The rest of us just call it variety.

**How Much Exercise Is Enough?**

by Rich Weil, MEd, CDE

There are two major U.S. guidelines:

- The American College of Sports Medicine calls for 20-60 minutes of continuous activity, three to five times a week, at 60%-90% of your maximum heart rate. This is a formal workout -- maybe at the gym, or jogging outdoors.

- The Surgeon General suggests accumulating a total of 30 minutes of moderate activity on most days of the week. This lets you incorporate activity into your life -- taking stairs instead of the elevator, doing sit-ups while you watch TV. It’s not meant to replace the ACSM guideline, but is for those not inclined to do a formal workout.

Either is a good choice. The important thing is to get on your way to an active, healthy lifestyle. Good luck!