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Is soreness a good indicator of a good workout? ^[1]

Dear Alice,

My trainer is getting annoyed because I am not experiencing soreness. I have been working out now with him and other trainers, three times a week, for three months now. Plus I do 45 minutes of cardio four times a week.

I think it's kind of odd that he bases his progress on how sore his clients are. I was always led to believe that soreness in muscles comes from working newfound muscle groups or aggressive workouts. During our workout I am feeling my muscles being worked and I have lost a number of inches and lbs since I have been working out. It seems to be a large issue with some of the trainers at this gym. I am wondering why! Also he had me doing 420 lbs on my legs. I am not a body builder nor do I want to be. I started to tone up. Advise please!

— Pushed too far?

Answer

Dear Pushed too far,

The old axiom, "no pain, no gain," is just that... old and outdated. Pain and soreness aren't valid measures of the benefits of exercise. Muscle soreness can occur with anyone who exercises, from a beginning exerciser embarking on a new program to a conditioned veteran who is working at a greater intensity, frequency, and/or duration than s/he is used to. It frequently happens to well-trained people as they begin a new activity. Muscle soreness may also be a result of overuse, which may eventually lead to injury. It's important to listen to your body and seek treatment for injuries.

Meeting goals in terms of developing strength or endurance needs to be the focus of any exercise program. Well-defined goals guide results that you are able to attain through gradual behavior change. Examples: I want to be able to do 20 push-ups; I want to be able to run a 10K by the end of the year, etc. Goals are specific and measurable and can be useful in guiding any training program. Soreness can be a consequence of working toward a training goal, but should not be a goal in and of itself.

You write: "I think it's kind of odd that he bases his progress on how sore his clients are." It's important to consider who is looking for the progress here: you the client or the trainer? *Your* development and achievement should be the trainer's first concern. Some trainers feel the way a client looks or how much s/he can lift is a direct reflection of her or his ability. Does it make sense for you to have a conversation with your trainer about your concerns?

Since soreness is not a reliable indicator of a "good" workout, it sounds your trainer may need a little training. Best of luck toning up!

Alice!

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