



## 7 Signs That You're Addicted to Exercise

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We've all heard about eating disorders and substance addictions. But did you know that hitting the gym too much can also become an addiction issue? According to **personal trainer and certified nutritionist Franci Cohen**, exercise addiction is an emerging topic of discussion in the medical community.

"Although a clinical definition of exercise addiction has not yet been established by the medical community, anyone 'obsessed' with exercising for the majority of the day everyday, puts their life on hold in favor of constant exercise, and someone that feels anxious or depressed when unable to exercise, most definitely suffers from exercise addiction," Cohen says.

While it may not be an official medical diagnosis yet, exercise addiction is a very real problem that affects approximately 3% of Americans. In fact, researchers Hausenblas and Downs have identified seven key signs of exercise addiction. (As a guideline, they used the substance dependence criteria from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, which is published by the American Psychiatric Association and is the official diagnostic system for mental health professionals in the U.S.). Read on to learn about seven hallmark signs of exercise addictions from mental health professionals, and to find out what you should do if you think you might be addicted to exercise.

**Tolerance: You find yourself having to exercise longer, harder, and more often in order to feel satisfied and accomplished with your work.**

Exercise is a behavior addiction, meaning that someone is addicted to an action (working out) or a result of that action (such as a post-workout endorphin high) as opposed to a substance like alcohol or drugs. However, your body quickly adapts when you put stress on it, making it harder and harder to achieve the desired feeling. As Cohen points out, "Often, people become addicted to the euphoric feeling that occurs when endorphins are released by the body during high levels of physical activity. This creates a positive feedback loop that is believed to be at the heart of the addiction." If you won't stop working out until you achieve that feeling of satisfaction, you'll find that you have to run longer and longer or lift heavier and heavier weights until you're ready to quit—and sometimes, that's more than your body can handle.

**Withdrawal: You feel crabby, anxious, or restless, have significant trouble sleeping, and experience other negative effects if you don't exercise.**

Numerous studies have been done concerning the benefits of regular exercise, including improved mood and energy, weight control, and better sleep. Therefore, it's natural to feel a little down or fatigued and to not sleep as well if you stop your regular exercise for a period of time. However, if your symptoms progress into anxiety, depression, and insomnia whenever you can't get to the gym

or go for a run, you may be dealing with an exercise addiction. Such seemingly extreme reactions can signal exercise withdrawal, which indicates that your body has become physically dependent on a high level of exercise in order to function normally, much as people can become dependent on alcohol, caffeine, or other substances.

**Lack of control: You have tried and failed to reduce or stop exercising for a set period of time before.**

Many people struggle to motivate themselves to stick to a fitness schedule and drive to the gym or go for a run consistently. So working out a lot is a good thing, right? Not necessarily, explains Cohen: “Excessive exercising can cause muscles to become catabolic and break down, rather than build up in a healthy manner. Additionally, the physical stress of the constant cardio can be quite taxing on the heart and lungs.” Because we hear so much about the benefits of exercise and how great it is to work out regularly, it can be hard to come to the realization that exercising too much can be just as bad for you. If you have the opposite problem of most people and can’t stop exercising even when you consciously try to, see if you have any of these other exercise addiction symptoms.

**Intention Effects: You consistently exercise for much longer than you intend to, tacking on extra sets and sessions.**

You’ve probably seen countless “fitspo” pins encouraging you to push through the pain and do “just one more” rep or mile. But like eating potato chips, “just one more” can easily turn into two, then three, then a whole extra set, and you can be adding a second or third daily workout before you know it. However, this “just one more” approach can actually have exactly the opposite result that you want. Cohen names numerous negative effects of over-exercising, including fatigue, loss of emotional vigor, decreased focus and concentration, decreased blood lactate, soreness and stiffness in the joints, adrenal exhaustion, inhibited lactic acid production response, hypothalamic dysfunction, and decreased maximum oxygen uptake. If you find yourself setting goals and consistently exceeding them by a lot — like running for an hour *after* your taxing hot yoga class — remember that your body needs to rest in order to perform at its best, and that constantly pushing yourself past your limits won’t do you any favors.

**Time: You devote an enormous amount of time to exercise, whether that’s actually working out or preparing for and recovering from it.**

If your workout schedule looks like it could be split between two Olympic athletes, you’re probably spending too much time exercising. Many of the criteria used to identify a behavioral addiction involve the time spent engaging in the behavior as well as the frequency of engagement, and exercise addiction is no different. Cohen says that exercising several hours a day, exercising any chance you get, and the feeling of never working out quite long enough for the day can all signal a potential exercise addiction. Obviously, if you’re training for a marathon or another endurance event, you will need to train for long periods of time, but if you’re spending hours in the gym without a particular event or goal to look forward to, it’s time to reevaluate that “training” schedule.

**Reduction in Other Activities: You often take off time from class or work and skip social events in order to exercise.**

Making exercise a priority in your life is important, and scheduling it into your day or week like a meeting is a good strategy to keep your workout from being accidentally replaced with other events. However, if you find yourself constantly skipping class, backing out of social engagements, or taking unpaid time off from work in order to go to the gym, then your priorities might need a little reordering. Neuropsychiatrist Dr. Julia Samton confirms that “the biggest red flag would be when exercise starts to interfere with one’s occupational, social and overall functioning. It’s at this point that treatment is recommended.” Your primary care physician can refer you to a specialist or an appropriate in- or out-patient program.

**Continuance: You keep exercising even though you know it’s making other physical and personal problems worse.**

If you’ve ever played (or even just watched) any sport, you’re probably familiar with the “walk it off” mentality — when someone is hurt, he or she “walks it off” and gets back in the game as soon as possible. This is all well and good for professional athletes who have personal trainers to examine them the instant they get off the field, but that doesn’t mean you should continue to run or lift right after you pull your hamstring or sprain your wrist. Playing a game of pickup basketball with a slight cold is fine, but if you’re significantly sick or injured (say, running a fever or nursing a twisted ankle) and you still feel compelled to work out, this can be a sign of exercise addiction.

While we think of working out as the pursuit of health, exercising to the point of exhaustion or constantly giving up other activities to hit the gym is anything but healthy. Diagnosing an exercise addiction is not foolproof, but if you (or someone you know) exhibit several of these symptoms, take a hard look at just how much of your life you’re devoting to exercise, and check with your doctor if you’re concerned.