

## What's the Best Exercise?

By Steven Jonas, MD, MPH

You have a patient sitting in your office, ready to get going with exercise. Or, at least, they're getting ready to get ready to get going with exercise. And the question comes up: "So Doc, what's the best exercise?" You might refer them to an article by Gretchen Reynolds recently published (April 17, 2011) in *The New York Times Magazine* entitled "What's the Single Best Exercise?" But then again, you might not. Actually, I wouldn't.

Ms. Reynolds begins her article by discussing the butterfly stroke. It requires a high level of oxygen consumption, burns more calories, and is more fatigue-inducing than any other swim stroke. Should it then be recommended because of these facts? No. An English professor of sports and exercise science tells us, "[The butterfly stroke] is miserable, isolating, and painful." Plus, it requires a pool and weight and flexibility training. It gets placed on the "no-no list" even though it is highly aerobic (presumably the reason she mentioned it at all).

Calisthenics are next on Ms. Reynolds' investigatory list. But these are boring for most so they, too, end up on the "no-no list." Then she explains that Michael Joyner, MD, a professor of anesthesiology at the Mayo Clinic likes "brisk walking" best. It's by "far and away the single best exercise" in his view. Brisk walking can produce many of the benefits of regular exercise and aid in weight control as an independent variable.

Because brisk walking holds little appeal for those who are already exercising, Stuart Phillips, PhD, nominates squats (about 25 of them at a time) on a regular basis. Or more generally, he recommends resistance-training with weights. That's the "single best exercise" according to him, producing all kinds of health benefits (including increased VO<sub>2</sub> max if one lifts weights aerobically). Then there's H.I.T. or "high-intensity interval training," using specialized stationary bikes known as "Wingate ergometers." Reynolds advises us, "Of course, to be effective, H.I.T. must hurt." Hmmm! There's the old "no pain, no gain" canard. This is certainly not the answer to entice a couch potato to become a regular exerciser. Nevertheless, Professor Martin J. Gibala of McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, tells us that a form of H.I.T., sprinting up stairs, is "a power workout and interval session simultaneously." And thus, Ms. Reynolds, concludes that "running up steps just might be the single best exercise of all."

Hmmm, really? It was my assumption that this article was geared to the general audience of exercisers when asking, "What's the single best exercise?" How many of them do you think would choose to run up stairs as their primary activity?

Both Ms. Reynolds and the authorities whom she interviewed left out the two most important variables when choosing a form of exercise to do regularly. They should have first asked, "Who is doing it?" The second question would be, "What is the goal or goals of the endeavor?" When exploring this topic with a patient or client, we need to approach the answer with the understanding that there is no "single best exercise" for everyone. Rather, the best exercise is that which is best for you.

Who are you? Are you young, old, or middle-aged? Do you live in an urban, suburban, or rural setting? Do you have family, or no family? Are you well or do you have some physical limitations? Did you play sports as a child? Were you any good at it? Were there any sports you liked? Do you have any athletic skills (that you're aware of)? Are you interested in racing or in distance sports? Do you have access to a gym and money to spend on membership? Would you rather work out at home? Do you have equipment, or money to buy equipment? How much time do you have? And so on and so forth. When considering this list of questions, it becomes obvious that there is, indeed, no "single best exercise."

That fact becomes even more obvious when we consider goal-setting. Why do you want to exercise? What do you think you will get out of it? Are you exercising for yourself or someone else (the former is good, the latter, not-so-good.) Will you have to give up anything to exercise on a regular basis? Are you willing to do this?

For the authorities whom Ms. Reynolds consulted the goal was obviously two-fold: to exercise aerobically and reduce the risk for sedentary lifestyle-related illnesses and conditions. These are both laudable reasons for exercising, but for most regular exercisers they are secondary, if on the radar at all. In previous issues of the journal, I've mentioned that in the 1980s I attended a session with Dr. Ken Cooper. When he asked the audience why they exercised, the resounding answer was "Because it makes us feel good." I get the same answer every time I pose it to a group with which I am talking.

Sure, some folks exercise regularly because they want to improve or maintain their health.



And some do it to build up their bodies in one way or another. If that is the case, perhaps, one of the recommended routines would be appropriate (although I can think of a bunch of others that are more fun and would help the exerciser achieve similar goals). In the end, though, it does all come down to *who they are* and *what their goals are*.

Finally, we come to the following point. As any regular exerciser will tell you, the hard part of regular exercise is the regular not the exercise. If exercising regularly is what the person wants to do in order to achieve their goals, then the exercise mode that gets them going and helps them stay with it is the best exercise for them. As many of you know, I am a long-time tri/duathlete (29 years and counting). The most important reason that I race (and I am slow and getting slower, so speed ain't it) is that for me multi-sport racing is just plain fun. But the second most important reason is that the racing keeps me training. I know I wouldn't train as much—and I don't do a lot, but I am very regular about it—if I didn't race. I know the benefits that regular exercise brings to me, first and foremost to my head: how I feel and feel about myself. Thus I keep on doing it.

That's why I emphatically say there is no "single best exercise." Rather, the best exercise for you is the exercise that's best for you.