

# Hitting NEW HIGHS

Are you working out without seeing results? Swapping your usual fitness routine for short bursts of intense exercise might just be the answer, says Daisy Sillis

**Y**ou've been working out, taking care of your body and making a conscious effort to eat well. You're not gaining weight, but you're also not getting any fitter. Welcome to fitness limbo. If this sounds familiar, you could benefit from high intensity interval training/strength training (HIIT or HIST for short), a new trend that claims to kick-start your fitness, tighten, shrink and strengthen your body. So what is HIIT, how does it work and does it really get results? I put my body to the test to find out.

## The 28-day challenge

I'm a creature of habit and my exercise routine consists of running four times a week and the occasional gym visit. I'm fit but I've reached a frustrating plateau. I decide to sign up for the 28-day HIST challenge at Body Tech's supervised gym in Auckland, which promises to help me gain strength and tone up. The challenge involves working out in a designated area using eight different machines which target the quadriceps, hamstrings, latissimus dorsi, teres major, pectoralis major, deltoids, biceps, triceps and rectus abdominis. The area is supervised by personal trainers who are there to support, courage and motivate.

## How does HIIT work?

High intensity interval training is an enhanced form of interval training which encourages short periods of intense anaerobic exercise (think red-faced and breathing heavily) with little recovery time in between. Research suggests that 30 minutes of HIIT burns more calories and fat than 30 minutes of walking or running. The short, intense bursts push your body into the anaerobic area which forces it out of its comfort zone, encouraging rapid strength improvement. Embracing the intensity results in momentary muscular failure (MMF), when muscles can no longer complete the movement in good form. Reaching MMF is the goal.

## What are the benefits?

Working out at an intense level for short periods of time means you work out less often for more reward. The physical results are more visible because your body is constantly improving and getting stronger to handle the pressure of the next workout.



Assistant fitness manager Rebekah Brownlee tells me the aim is to work hard on each machine reaching an average of eight to 12 reps in good form with just a 10-second break between each machine. Once I achieve this, Rebekah says the weight levels will increase for the next session.

Rebekah instructs me to run less to allow my body to recover from the HIIT sessions. The aim, she says, is to get to 'failure' on each machine – and for once, this is a positive. "Muscle failure is a good thing because it stimulates your muscles, forcing them to grow stronger," explains Rebekah. "It happens when you ask your body to do something it can't do, so to adapt it has to grow and get better."

Before starting the challenge I spend two weeks learning how to use the machines and my weight, body fat, body measurements and cardiovascular function are assessed. I walk away promising to eat healthily, drink at least two litres of water a day, limit my alcohol intake and attend HIIT three times a week with a 'go hard or go home' mind-set.

## Week one

I arrive for my first session eager, motivated and ready to take on the challenge. I run on the treadmill for 15 minutes to warm up before starting the HIIT circuit. It takes me 35 minutes (including my warm-up) to complete the session and I'm concerned that working out for only a short period of time, three times a week will make me antsy and that I'll miss my long runs. Having four rest days isn't as hard as I anticipated, however, and my aching arms and legs are thankful for it. An unexpected consequence is that the short HIIT sessions mean I end up with more free time – result!

## Week two

My weights are increased at each session and by the end of week two I start to lose motivation and become irritated by HIIT's 'failure' concept. After finally completing 12 successful reps on a machine, having my weights increased feels like a punishment. I also find that I do miss running. In an attempt to clear my head, I go for an hour run on one of my recovery days. At the time it's worth it, but at the





gym the following day my stiff legs mean even more discomfort on the machines. Rebekah says it's normal to feel frustrated but to stick to the programme.

"It's uncomfortable and it hurts but it gets your heart rate up and the rewards are worth the pain," she says. "Rest days are just as important as the workouts. Taking your muscles to failure means the muscle fibres tear. They need a few days to repair and it's vital you allow for that."

I'm now halfway through my challenge and I am starting to notice changes in my body. Muscles in my arms and back are becoming more toned and my strength is improving. I'm also benefiting from drinking more water and realise that I must

### The results

**Body fat:** Before the challenge my body fat is measured at 24 per cent. After the 28-day programme my body fat drops to 20.2 per cent, pushing me from an acceptable body fat level into the fit category.

**Body measurements:** My waist measurement drops by 1cm and my thigh measurement reduces by 2.5cm.

**Weight:** Losing weight was never my goal, but after the challenge the scales say I've lost 1kg.

**Heart rate:** The resting heart rate test reveals a 9 per cent improvement in my cardiovascular levels, which my trainer tells me is a massive accomplishment.

previously have spent most of my day suffering unknowingly from dehydration. Increasing my water consumption means I cut down

my coffee intake and, surprisingly, I'm feeling more alert.

### Week three

I've been working hard and in week three there is a dramatic increase in my weights. With just a handful of gym sessions left I start stressing about my upcoming results. Tired and sore, halfway through a HIIT session I burst into tears. Rebekah, who only seconds before was chanting supportively that I still had six arm-raising reps to go, allows me to stop and recoup. After a few tears and a pep talk my weights are dropped slightly and I move onto the next machine. At the end of the circuit I discuss my concerns about the weight levels and my internal battle to improve. Rebekah says what I am feeling is normal. "The frustration most people feel is due to the muscle failure, but failure is success," she says. "Until you understand the science behind it, it is frustrating. That's why we have trainers around to help."

### Week four

In the final week I feel stronger mentally and physically and I'm excited at the prospect of finding out my results. I work extra hard during the circuits, without compromising on my form or my mental health. The HIIT challenge has been just that, a challenge. I've had both good days and bad but I've managed to attend all my gym sessions and stick to the rules (well, bar a few cheeky runs).

At the end of the week I'm happy with my results. I'm stronger and fitter than ever before, but the most exciting outcome is learning that sticking to one particular style of exercise means you're likely to plateau and experience little improvement in your fitness and physique. As much as running is my favourite form of exercise,

I now know that if I balance my week with a few runs and some high intensity workouts I'll get the best of both worlds. ☺