Rethinking Women's Fitness: Mixing High-Intensity Interval Training with Self-Care

Conventional workout advice calls for hours of moving and lifting, and many sacrifice time at work and home for their health, creating stress in other ways. What if there is a better way?

What Is High-Intensity Interval Training (HIIT)?

HIIT workouts take many forms, ranging from aerobic and body-weight activities to strength and resistance training. Variations include short bursts of work to reach 80-95% of maximum heart rate (HRmax), followed by an appropriate recovery period. Typically, more intense bursts of energy require longer recovery times.

Examples include the following:

- **Tabata:** 20 seconds of work with 10 seconds of rest
- **Every minute on the minute (EMOM):** 30 seconds on, 30 seconds rest
- **Sprint Interval Training (SIT)**: 20 seconds "all out" followed by full recovery (averaging two to five minutes)
- **Circuit Training**: Strategically combining multiple exercises into one workout
- **Supersets**: Working a different or antagonistic muscle group rather than resting between sets
- **Combining muscle groups:** Instead of squats and shoulder press, try the fluid, full-body movement known as "thrusters"

What Are the Benefits of HIIT and SIT?

Studies emphasize the following improvements:

- Cortisol
- Hunger/satiety hormone regulation
- Inflammation
- Glucose/HbA1c
- Body fat composition
- Bone density in sedentary young females and postmenopausal women
- Sleep/wake cycles
- Sleep quality
- Improved mood
- Engagement and adherence compared to moderate intensity continuous exercise

What Challenges Do Women Face When Incorporating HIIT and SIT?

For HIIT and SIT to be effective, exercise intensity needs to increase as physical ability improves. Stopping HIIT results in lost gains.

Both HIIT and SIT preserve muscle mass in short-term studies, even when combined with intermittent fasting. Women may prioritize beauty over health — although appearance improves with increased lean muscle mass and a decreased body fat percentage, regardless of weight — depriving themselves of the nutrients needed to develop strong bones and muscles.

No one builds a skyscraper without securing steel and concrete. Women who meet their nutritional needs achieve their goals faster than those who fall into an energy deficit. In fact, when women overstress their bodies with poor nutritional intake while exercising, they lose bone mass regardless of their age, estrogen levels, or menstrual status.

Poor recovery due to inadequate sleep and over-exercise leads to stress and increased cortisol levels. Cortisol motivates us to achieve goals; prolonged activation can lead to belly fat storage. While counterintuitive, women need to permit themselves to rest properly to make gains.

HIIT training increases the risk of injury. Peri- and postmenopausal women may possess the muscle strength and cardiorespiratory fitness to begin an intense workout. Tendons and ligaments may lose elasticity and require a preconditioning season to prepare for dynamic movement. Women should learn proper technique for highly technical movements (e.g., sprinting or weightlifting) and avoid exceeding their capabilities with equipment (e.g., running on treadmills and throwing around weights) to reduce the risk of injury.

Getting Started With HIIT and SIT

HIIT and SIT show promising health benefits in nearly every domain, from the sedentary young woman through post-menopause. While women need to take special care of themselves by eating and resting well, starting gently, and learning proper form, this fun, short, and engaging exercise program delivers amazing results for appearance, metabolic markers, and mood. Time saved, coupled with increased stamina, enables greater investment in other important areas of life.

What do you think of the idea of incorporating HIIT and SIT into your weekly routine? What other health and wellness topics deserve a deep dive? Please respond in the comments below!

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