

Exercise Tip #4 – Measuring Exertion and The Talk Test

There are many ways to measure your exertion level when exercising. You can monitor your heart rate with fancy gadgets or handles on cardio equipment; You can use the Ratings of Perceived Exertion (RPE) scale, a 1-20 numbered system where you rate how you feel while exercising; You can use calorie counters or pedometers to help you reach different goals.

Why should you monitor your level of exertion when doing cardiovascular exercise? Some people like to work within a certain heart rate range that they feel optimizes fat burning. Other people may be trying to improve their lactate threshold so that they can do high intensity exercise for longer. There are a number of reasons why a person would want to monitor their exertion level. The best reason though for the average exerciser, Joe gym rat, to monitor their exertion level is to be sure you are doing exercise that is difficult enough to produce beneficial effects on your body without being so difficult that it cannot be maintained for 20-40 minutes.

A very easy and usable approach to measuring how hard you are or should be working is the Talk Test. After you warm up for 5-10 minutes and have increased the intensity of your exercise to a point where you want to stay for the duration of your session, take this simple test:

- Pretend that you are talking to a friend next to you – or actually talk to someone next to you!
- If your friend asked you what you had for dinner last night, how would you answer him?
 1. In full sentences, with adjectives and lots of detail: Eg, “I had a beautiful, roasted chicken breast with garlicky mashed potatoes that had little flecks of parsley in it. The chardonnay was crisp and light and for dessert, I had a lovely chocolate cake with pecans.”
 2. In broken, choppy sentences with less detail: Eg, “I had chicken breast, (pause) a few mashed potatoes, (pause) some white wine, (pause) and some cake.
 3. In gasps: Eg, “Chicken, (gasp) mashed potatoes (gasp), wine (gasp)…”

If you can accomplish a #1 response, you are not working hard enough to elicit beneficial fitness gains or even burn significant calories, unless you plan to do that intensity of exercise for more than 60 minutes.

If you responded as in the #2 example, you are probably right on target to be in the 70%-80% maximal heart rate range, the proper and correct intensity to elicit beneficial fitness gains and burn optimum body fat. You should be able to maintain this intensity for 20-60 minutes, but would tire after that.

If you are a #3 gasper – slow down. You’re working too hard and you will not be able to maintain that intensity for very long. And once you quit exercising, well, obviously you won’t be realizing many fitness gains.

The Talk Test can be used with almost any mode of exercise except swimming, isn’t reliant on batteries and really puts the exerciser in touch with their body rather than a little number on a wristband.

Try it and see.

