

EXERCISE : TINY TWEAKS

Small steps, giant gains

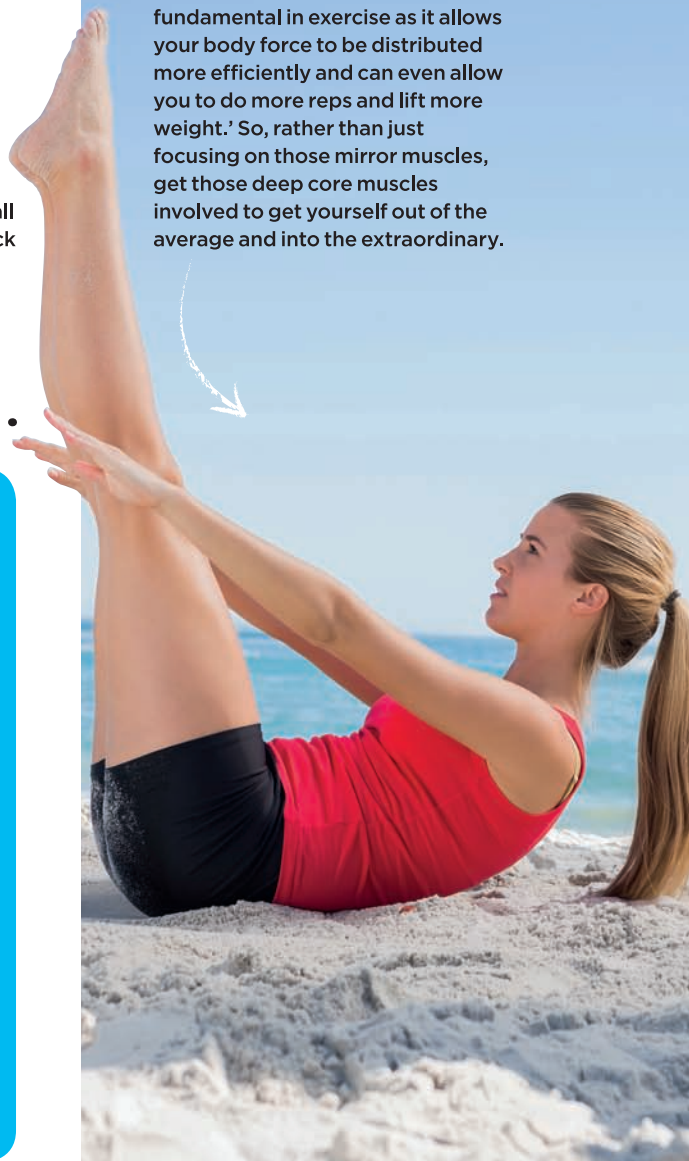
Want to shift your results into a higher gear? These six easy workout tweaks will make all the difference to your bod

Want to blast a few stubborn pounds? Maybe you've lost loads of weight, but just want to tighten and tone a little? Even if your goal is just to make your workouts that little bit more challenging, you'll be happy to hear that it's as easy as a tiny

tweak here and there to boost results all around. No need to wake up at the crack of dawn for a crazy session, push yourself until you're sick or exercise several times a day. Just fine-tune the workouts you're already doing. Easy right? Check out our top tips.

2 TAKE IT TO THE CORE

Keeping your core engaged is the first commandment of exercise. You'll hear it from almost every PT and fitness instructor, but why is it so important? 'By engaging or "activating" your core muscles you allow yourself to be stronger at your weakest point,' Matt explains. 'Engaging the core is fundamental in exercise as it allows your body force to be distributed more efficiently and can even allow you to do more reps and lift more weight.' So, rather than just focusing on those mirror muscles, get those deep core muscles involved to get yourself out of the average and into the extraordinary.



1 SQUEEZE YOUR BUNS

We're all for trying new exercises and challenging yourself. But be careful. Doing moves incorrectly is not only pointless, but can cause weaknesses and injuries. The solution? Squeeze that ass. Yep, just like focusing on engaging the core, getting your glutes in on the action is super important for form, stability and support. 'Activating the glutes helps stabilise your hips,' explains body transformation expert Matt Hodges (themphmethod.com). 'This helps in maintaining your core position through various motions. Most of us have lazy glutes, which tend to make our hamstrings work improperly. This can cause problems like backache, knee ache, weak hips and a weak lower back. Keeping the squeeze on the glutes not only acts in stabilising the trunk and hips, but also gives you a nice, firm butt!'

3 WAYS TO UPGRADE YOUR DIET

1 EAT PROTEIN

Whether it's eggs, fish or cottage cheese, make sure you include a good portion of protein with every meal. It'll help you recover from exercise to make sure you're always ready for the next workout.

2 GET CARB WISE

Steer clear of those nasty refined carbohydrates. They'll spike your blood sugar levels and wreak absolute havoc with your energy levels - which will undoubtedly affect your performance in the gym.

3 STAY HYDRATED

It's not really about how much you drink *during* exercise, but the fact that you need to be well-hydrated from the very beginning of your session. So drink plenty of water, even on non-exercise days.





3 BREATHE IN, BREATHE OUT

Every keen yogi will have heard the instructor talk up the importance of the breath. And giving your breathing some extra attention on the gym floor can be just as useful. 'Breathing helps activate your core and diaphragm,' Matt reveals. 'Efficient breathing leads to energy flow through the body which affects both muscular endurance and pain tolerance.' It's basic science. Breathing in gets oxygen to your muscles, and breathing out gets rid of carbon dioxide – a waste product which can hinder your performance.



5 FIND YOUR FOCUS

Your body is a slave to your mind. Whatever your body does, it does because the mind commands it. But, even so, we don't use our muscles to their fullest potential because we're generally unable to activate them to this extent. 'We're all limited by how much we can genetically activate our muscles,' explains Matt. 'How many people can wiggle their ears? Probably not many, but it's just a muscular response from the brain. This is no different to any other muscle in the body, but some are easier to activate. Just look at how easy it is to use your biceps compared to your back muscles. It's why so many people struggle with pull-ups.' When you're doing exercises in the gym, try to focus on contracting and controlling the muscles you're working to create a connection between your mind and body.

4 GET DYNAMIC

We've been saying it for yonks, but if you're still doing static stretches before your workout, stop! A dynamic warm-up is much more efficient at preparing your body for a workout, as well as preventing injury. 'Dynamic stretching sends blood to your muscles without inhibiting their strength,' explains Matt. 'It allows the muscle to stretch through its full range of motion without holding the stretch point too long. Holding the stretch point too long promotes relaxation – the last thing you want before you go hard!' Try some dynamic stretches that replicate the movements you'll be making in your workout – think high-knee marches and bounding before a run.



6 GO SLOW

Thought doing weights was as easy as simply lifting and lowering with the correct form? Think again. The speed at which you contract into a move and release out of it – the tempo – seriously affects what you get out of it, even when it comes to body weight exercises. This is down to the effect that varying tempo has on the muscle itself. 'Slower movements with weight allow all portions of the muscle to be activated,

loading the muscle with more resistance and making it stronger,' explains Matt. 'Rushed movements tend to misfire, so you won't utilise all the muscle. But, in power tempos – more explosive movements – the muscles learn how to contract at an explosive rate, so this is useful, too. For best results, use a slow and controlled tempo for the eccentric movement – that's the lowering of the weight – and an explosive tempo for the concentric part of the movement – the phase where you're contracting.'

