

Break out of your workout rut

Expert tips to kick-start your fitness routine

By **Denise Schipani** for USA TODAY



Slogging through a boring workout routine? Trying to find the motivation to get started?

When your motivation wanes, getting in gear and making the most of your workout is that much harder.

If you're feeling stuck, change things up and put the spring back into your sneaker-clad step. Whether you're an occasional exerciser or an obsessive one, these tips will help you take your workout to the next level.



Make for the machines

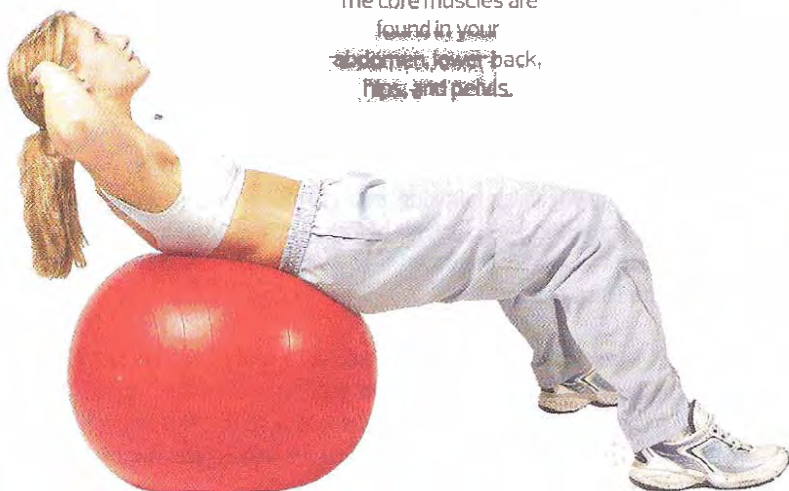
› A few changes in how you use your favorite cardio machines can give you a major boost.

DON'T FORGET THE ARMS! Use the arm-pulls on the elliptical machine rather than just letting your arms go along for the ride. "Deliberately pushing and pulling adds to your overall workload," says Michele Olson, director of the human performance lab at Auburn University in Montgomery, Ala. On the flip side, if you're on a machine that has armrests (like a treadmill), resist the urge to hang on with a death grip. "Try just a light fingertip touch for balance," says Olson. "You'll immediately see how much harder you have to work."

INTERVAL TRAIN You might think training harder means going longer, but that's not necessarily the case. Mixing up your pace can give you a better workout and keep you interested. "Split your workout into two- or three-minute segments and play with pace and incline," says Karin Richards, director of the exercise science and wellness management program at the University of the Sciences in Philadelphia. "If 5.5 mph is your base, go up to 6 mph for 2 minutes, then back down. Or raise the incline for a couple of minutes, then lower it." You'll burn more calories without having to increase your time.

Where exactly is your core?

The core muscles are found in your abdomen, lower back, hips, and pelvis.



Crunch different

› Crunches are popular for a reason: They work. But there are better (and less repetitive) ways to get a rock-hard midsection.

HAVE A BALL Try doing your regular exercises on a stability ball. “You’ll be forced to enlist other muscles in your core just to keep yourself stable while you crunch,” says Richards. Or do your regular crunches while holding a medicine ball in your hands in front of you, pushing it away from your chest as you come up.

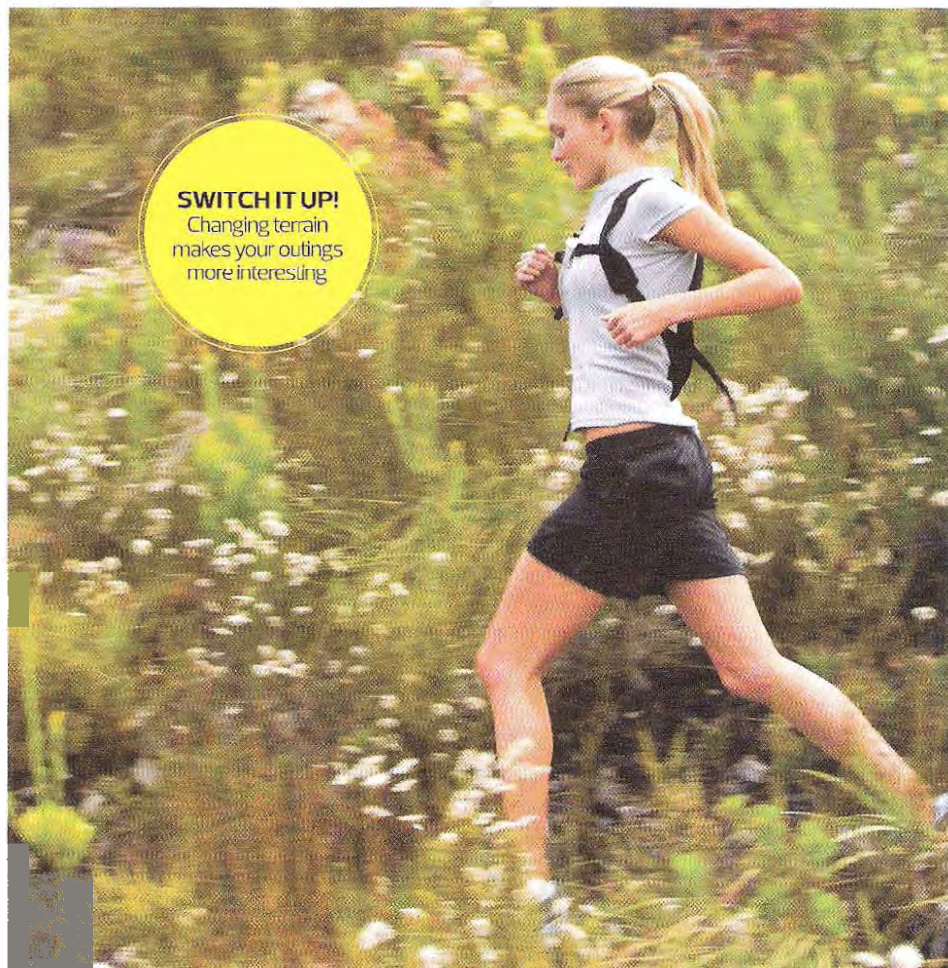
THINK 360 Remember, abs are more than just the six pack you’re working towards. “Abdominal muscles wrap all the way around your body,” says Olson. So add in moves that work the whole core, such as a plank or pilates-style roll-ups. Think about using your core during every exercise. Visualize pulling your belly button back toward your spine while you’re running, working on a machine, or taking a dance class.

Go out more

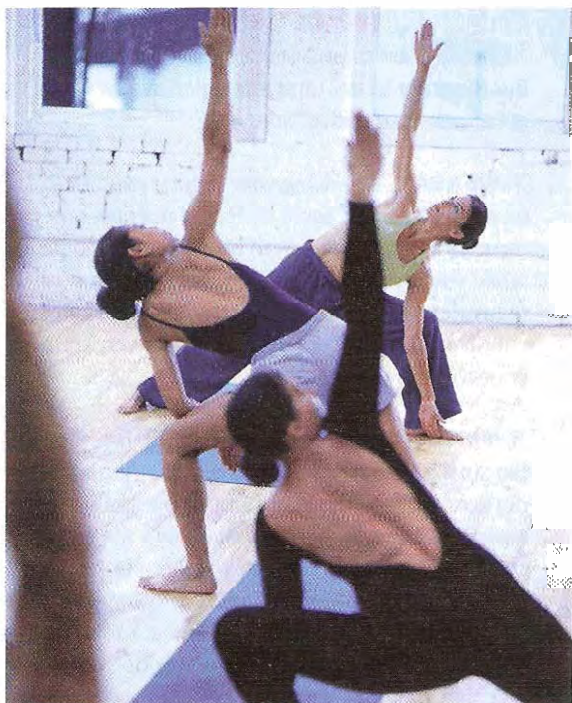
› Suspect that your same old jog around the neighborhood isn’t quite enough? Don’t quit—just add a challenge or two.

ALTER YOUR TERRAIN The open road or the high school track is fine, but the more varied your terrain, the tougher the workout. Running on gravel, over woody paths, and up and down hills forces changes in gait and stride, recruiting different muscles all the time, says Richards. Plus, changing terrain makes your outings more interesting.

SIGN UP FOR A RACE You don’t have to go for a half marathon or a 10K your first time out. Signing up for a 5K charity race will motivate you to train more consistently. “Also, the adrenaline rush you’ll feel when you compete and finish with a crowd is addictive,” Richards adds. Find customizable training plans online at Couch to 5K (c25k.com) and Hal Hidgon (halhidgon.com).



SWITCH IT UP!
Changing terrain makes your outings more interesting.



Get classy

› If your self-motivation is flagging, maybe you need to surround yourself with like-minded exercisers. A little bit of company, and the motivation that comes along with it, goes a long way.

TAKE A CLASS They say no one's looking at anyone else in a class, but—let's face it—we all compare ourselves to others. "Use competition to your advantage. It pushes you to work harder," says Richards. Camaraderie is another great feature of a class. Once you know your classmates, you feel more obligated to show up.

TRY A NEW (TO YOU) CLASS New exercise options are always popping up. Whether it's yogalates, piloxing, or a good old-fashioned spinning class, trying something you haven't before gets you outside your comfort zone and challenges your body. A new class also engages your mind as you learn the moves.

GO TOTAL BODY Mind-body classes, like yoga or tai chi, may not feel like a real workout, but the movements tend to use smaller muscles in more focused ways. That can equal serious results. "Plus, most of us need better flexibility, and it's likely you never stretch on your own as thoroughly as you would in a class," says Olson.



Muscle up

› If you want your muscles to keep getting stronger, you've got to keep challenging them.

LIFT HEAVIER You can hoist those 3-pound weights all you want, but that will do little more than build endurance. Picking up increasingly heavier weights improves strength, tone, and metabolic activity, meaning you are burning more calories. How do you know when it's time to up your weight? "Do eight reps of an exercise," suggests Richards. "If you can do all eight without feeling the final one as a strain, it's too light."

QUIT COUNTING If you work on weight machines, work in bursts of 30 seconds, suggests Olson. "Complete as many reps as you can in 30 seconds without losing your form. Rest for another half-minute, then repeat." This method, called metabolic resistance training, challenges your muscles, gets your heart rate up, and increases your metabolic rate.

Deal your workout

By **Bob Thomas**

CHANGE UP YOUR WORKOUT WITH A DECK OF CARDS. Shuffle and reshuffle for endless combinations. Here's how it works.

1. Grab a deck of cards. Discard the jokers. Assign a specific strength exercise to each suit. For example, spades could be push-ups, hearts squats, clubs crunches, and diamonds lunges.

2. Assign a specific cardio exercise to each face card. For example, jacks could be jogging in place, queens jumping jacks, and kings sprints. Decide on a time limit for each exercise.

3. Shuffle the cards. As you turn over each card, complete the required exercise. If it's a numbered card, do reps equal to the number on the card. If it's a face card, do the assigned cardio.

Variations Set a time limit. See how far you can make it through the entire deck. Then challenge yourself to get further through the deck in the same amount of time. Go through the entire deck and record the time it took you. Then work on reducing the time.

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