



Push it

Push-ups aren't just for guys. Here's how to make this exercise work for you

By Maya Zahran

THERE'S NO DOUBT ABOUT IT: push-ups are demanding. So demanding that we instinctively avoid doing them. But make them part of your fitness routine and you'll reap the benefits.

Push-ups are not only an effective way to build your upper-body strength, they're also a great way to tone your arms, engage your chest and condition the abs. Best of all, they're a functional exercise, which means they mimic the movements of everyday life.

Andrew Tong – a certified triathlon coach with Triathlon Australia – says the push-up is particularly useful for women because it's weight bearing.

"This type of exercise is important

for maintaining your bone density and provides an opportunity for women to build strength in their chest, upper arms, forearms and wrists," he explains.

For many of us, however, push-ups are a form of punishment. But it doesn't have to be that way – the trick, says Tong, is to ease into it.

"It's only punishing if you attempt something beyond your ability. It must require effort and challenge you, but it must also be achievable. Start at a beginner level and build from there."

Quantity of push-ups isn't the goal here, he adds. "Form and technique should always be the priority – slow and controlled. However, if you're only managing two push-ups, maybe you're attempting a level higher than your current fitness and should look at making the push-up easier."

Guide

HOW MANY SHOULD I DO?

Beginners

Reps of ten morning and night, every other day.

Intermediates

Build to two reps of 20 every other day. You could also start at three reps of ten.

Advanced

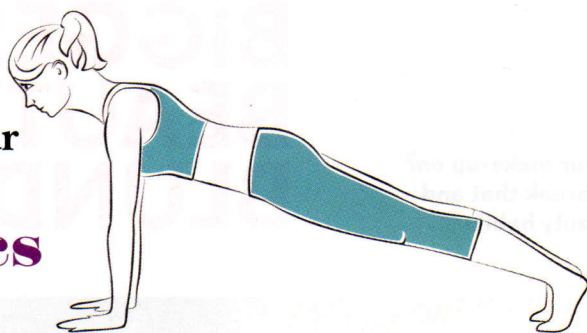
Comfortably complete 30 consecutively, either five days a week or every other day.

NO CHEATING!
To get the full benefit, avoid these common mistakes:

- Letting your hips drop at any point during the exercise.
- Sticking your butt in the air.
- Reaching down with your head.
- Letting your lower body follow your upper body as you lift back up.
- Not dropping all the way down to the floor, or not pushing all the way back up.

How to add push-ups to your fitness routine

The basics



Start in the plank position.

Stretch out with hands and feet on the ground. Keep your arms straight and slightly wider than shoulder-width apart.

Keep your shoulders over your wrists and your body in a straight line.

Lower your entire body towards the floor by bending your arms, then lift back up by

straightening them. Keep your back straight and your abdominal muscles engaged.

TIP To ensure proper form, use the chin-chest-thigh rule: your chin, chest and thighs should all touch the floor simultaneously when you're lowering your body, and should all leave the floor together when you push up.

Challenge

To increase the degree of difficulty once you've mastered the basic push-up, Tong suggests:

Elevate your legs (decline push-up).

Adjust the position of your hands. Alternate between a wide grip, narrow grip, or aligned below your chest rather than shoulders.

Add a weight on your back, but be sure it's not too heavy.

Plyometric and clapping. Push up in a fast and powerful motion to enable you to lift your hands off the ground and clap them together. This is an advanced-level technique.

Variations

If you can't do a push-up without breaking form, find a variation that works for you.

Start by doing push-ups in a standing position against a wall to reduce the weight on your arms. "If you do a vertical push-up [against the wall], then only a small percentage of your body weight will be utilised," says Tong. "This is the easiest variation."

To progress the push-up from vertical to horizontal, try pushing up from a box or bench. When you've mastered that, get on the floor, but push up from your knees, rather than feet (pictured right). This lets you hold your core without engaging all of your leg muscles.

If a couple of standard push-ups are too easy, keep going until your muscles get tired. Make sure you maintain good form and challenge yourself to do a few more every time. ●

