

Been exercising the remote more than your body? Use these tips to prevent the strains and soreness that come with getting back in the game.

WEEKEND WARRIOR

(WEEKDAY WIMP)

By Beau Dure for USA TODAY

THE HUMAN BODY SIMPLY ISN'T MEANT

to sit around for five days and then cram a week's worth of exercise into a two-day weekend. But that's just what many of us do.

"It puts a lot of stress on the body if you try to cram a significant amount of exercise into two consecutive days," says Jeffrey Spang, an assistant professor of orthopedics at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. "If you do nothing for five days, then have a very intense weekend plan, you're really putting too much stress on the system."

It's a Catch-22 of sorts. Your desire to exercise can work against you if you're not already in decent shape.

"It doesn't matter whether you work in a warehouse or are in the Army, the fitter you are, the lower the risk of injuries," says Delia Roberts, a faculty member at Selkirk College in British Columbia.

Sure, being a weekend warrior is better than following up a week at a desk with a weekend on the couch. But if you have to do most of your exercise on Saturdays and Sundays, bear a few things in mind to get the most out of your workouts and to avoid limping back to work on Monday.



Don't run a 10k your first day. Start slow and increase your stamina.



WORK YOUR WAY UP SLOWLY

➤ **IF YOU HAVEN'T RUN SINCE YOU WERE LATE FOR CLASS** your freshman year, you might want to avoid signing up for a marathon 30 years later. That would be a bit of a shock to your system.

"Taking a great big jump is not going to help you move your training forward faster," Roberts says.

Running in particular can put a lot of stress on the legs. But any sort of exercise can be risky if you do too much too soon.

"It's not necessarily that jogging is worse than biking," Spang says. "It's more the intensity level. If you say I'm going to do 2 miles today and you haven't been working your way up to it, that's the bigger problem. If you're someone who has a biking regimen to do a mile or two on the weekend and you continually work your way up, that doesn't tend to be as stressful. What's more stressful is setting up your goal and really ramping up activity, then trying to make big leaps on the weekends."

Finding the right pace for ramping up your activity is something else worth discussing with a personal trainer or doctor. Runners have long sworn by a 10 percent rule, never increasing weekly mileage by more than 10 percent from the previous week.

USE PROPER FORM

➤ **WHETHER YOU'RE LIFTING WEIGHTS** or swinging a golf club, use proper technique. If the exercise puts a lot of stress on a small part of your body, you might be doing it wrong.

If weights are involved, the risk of injury is greater.

"When you start to work out with weights, there are some very basic techniques that can help keep you safe," Spang says. "It's beneficial to have some instruction on how to properly use the weights. There are certain angles, particularly with the upper extremities, where you're over-lifting and stressing things.

PREPARE

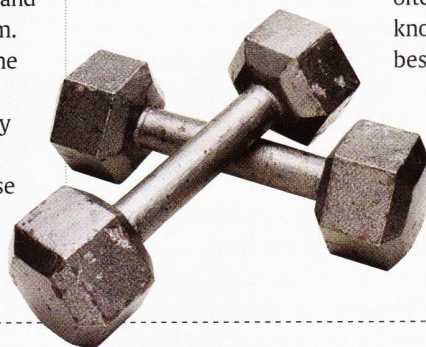
➤ **WE'RE ALL DIFFERENT.** Some of us have never been injured. Some of us have knees and ankles that never quite healed after a high school sports season. Some of us need to get rid of belly fat before worrying about much else. Some are trim and lean but aren't quite as prepared as we think we are for a weekend on the basketball court.

"If you're beginning a new program, it's worthwhile to make a plan to do a little bit of investigation, checking some reasonable websites, perhaps visiting with a personal trainer if you have the means," Spang says. "What you need to do is come up with a plan that applies to what you want to do."

Personal trainers can help you set goals and determine which exercises work best for you and which might be risky. The quickest way to find a trainer is to join a gym. Many gyms employ trainers who know the facility's equipment inside and out, and some offer free sessions just to get you started.

Websites can be more difficult to sort through. Plenty of sites are little more than advertising for a particular product or method dressed up to look like a medical guide. Try name-brand sites like WebMD as well as nonprofits such as Livestrong.com or government-reviewed information from places such as the National Institutes of Health's MedlinePlus. Some major hospitals, such as the Mayo Clinic, also offer online tips.

But the ultimate goal is to find what works for you, and that means the best place to start is often the person who knows your health the best, your doctor.



Lifting weights is a great way to get back in peak shape, but use proper form.

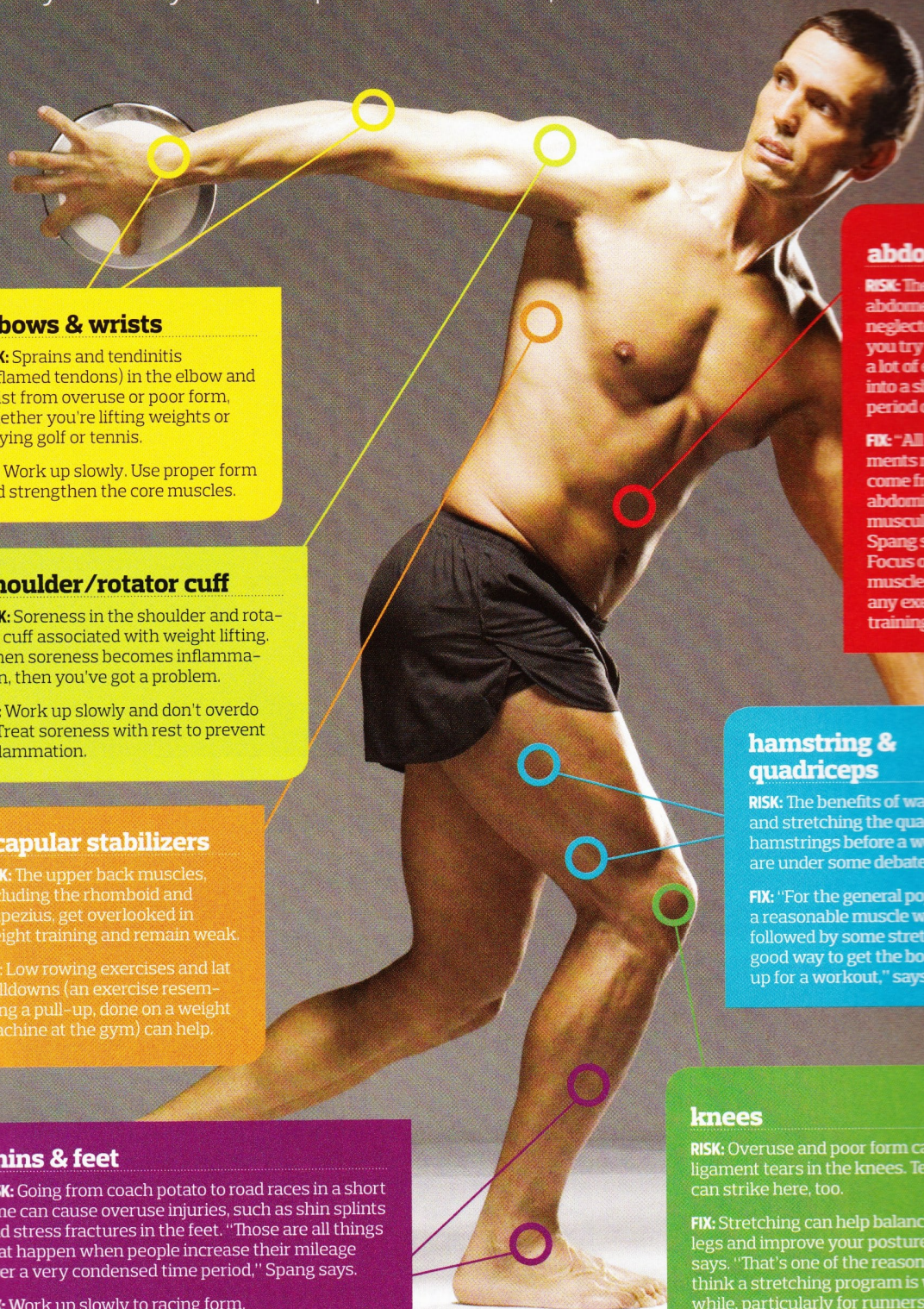
You can really hurt yourself lifting."

Sometimes, you can get all the instruction you need at the gym. A lot of weight machines have diagrams showing you exactly what to do. For more complicated exercises, consult trainers or guides.

With sports, make sure you account for the fact that your body has changed in all sorts of ways since high school. Listen to your body and consider taking a refresher class in the sport of your choosing to see if your form is still okay.

YOUR BREAKING POINTS

Know your body's weak spots and how to protect them



elbows & wrists

RISK: Sprains and tendinitis (inflamed tendons) in the elbow and wrist from overuse or poor form, whether you're lifting weights or playing golf or tennis.

FIX: Work up slowly. Use proper form and strengthen the core muscles.

shoulder/rotator cuff

RISK: Soreness in the shoulder and rotator cuff associated with weight lifting. When soreness becomes inflammation, then you've got a problem.

FIX: Work up slowly and don't overdo it. Treat soreness with rest to prevent inflammation.

scapular stabilizers

RISK: The upper back muscles, including the rhomboid and trapezius, get overlooked in weight training and remain weak.

FIX: Low rowing exercises and lat pulldowns (an exercise resembling a pull-up, done on a weight machine at the gym) can help.

shins & feet

RISK: Going from coach potato to road races in a short time can cause overuse injuries, such as shin splints and stress fractures in the feet. "Those are all things that happen when people increase their mileage over a very condensed time period," Spang says.

FIX: Work up slowly to racing form.

abdomen

RISK: The abdomen can be neglected when you try to cram a lot of exercise into a short period of time.

FIX: "All movements really come from the abdominal musculature," Spang says. Focus on these muscles during any exercise training.

hamstring & quadriceps

RISK: The benefits of warming up and stretching the quads and hamstrings before a workout are under some debate.

FIX: "For the general population, a reasonable muscle warm-up followed by some stretching is a good way to get the body tuned up for a workout," says Spang.

knees

RISK: Overuse and poor form can cause ligament tears in the knees. Tendinitis can strike here, too.

FIX: Stretching can help balance your legs and improve your posture, Spang says. "That's one of the reasons that I think a stretching program is worthwhile, particularly for runners," he says.

BUILD YOUR CORE

> DON'T FOCUS SO MUCH ON WHAT SPANG CALLS

mirror muscles—the biceps and pectorals that we admire in the mirror—without building the stabilizers across the upper back and shoulders. (See the body chart.)

Then remember that many of our movements, both in everyday life and in exercise, are generated from the middle of our bodies, not our arms and legs.

"The further away from your center, the greater the force is generated," Roberts says. "A lot of [the pain] we attribute to a knee, an ankle, or a shoulder [originated] in the spine. When you look at muscular injury, improving posture and alignment is a big protector."

The good news is that simple core exercises can be done without changing into your gym clothes or even leaving your desk. Livestrong.com and other sites list a few exercises you can do while seated, such as lifting knees while keeping the torso steady and doing modified sit-ups.

"Get somebody to help you set up a program that you can incorporate into your day," Roberts says. "So at your desk, you have core exercises that you do five times a day."



We all have moments where we're waiting for the computer to boot up, or you're on the phone, waiting for someone to get back to us. There are so many times in your day when you can check your posture, activate your core, and get that program on the road."

Delia Roberts, *biology professor*



JUST DO IT

A 2004 study on exercise and mortality in the *American Journal of Epidemiology* found that regular exercise is optimal (no surprise) and that being active only on weekends is better than not being active at all.

DO SOMETHING DURING THE WEEK

> WE DON'T ALL HAVE TIME TO

spend 90 minutes in the gym or put in 50 miles on our bikes on a typical workday. But when it comes to weekday workouts, anything is better than nothing.

If you can squeeze in a short workout before work, great. A high-intensity walk on a lunch break also isn't bad. If you're working through lunch, at least try to take the stairs in the office instead of the elevator.

"Our bodies were designed to move," Roberts says. "It's when we stop moving that we have problems."

And if you're trying to build muscle, you have to grab some weights during the week.

"There's no question that when you're doing something like weight training, your body benefits from multiple days of working out," Spang says. "If you try to do a muscle-intensive workout only once a week, not only do you not work out effectively—you're not really getting the muscle gains and strength gains that you're looking for—I think you put yourself at risk."

That doesn't necessarily mean investing hundreds of dollars in weight-training gear at home. Push-ups, crunches, and squats don't require any equipment. You can also try resistance bands and similar equipment.