

Workouts on the Web

Leg lunges in front of a computer screen? Why not? Especially when the Internet offers many good exercise videos for free.

By Melinda Fulmer

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If you're determined to get fit, but don't have the budget for a gym membership or an endless parade of exercise DVDs to keep your interest piqued, try getting your workouts from the Web.

FOR THE RECORD:

Online workouts: In Monday's Health section, an article about online workouts said workout videos from Netflix are available for streaming to PCs but not yet to Macs. Since October, the videos have been available for streaming to Macs that are Intel-based. Also, the wrong website was listed for Ultimate Pilates Workouts. It is www.ultimatepilatesworkouts.com. The accompanying photo of a woman on an exercise ball was incorrectly credited. The correct credit, including the source's ".tv" domain, is www.exercisetv.tv. —

Streaming workout videos -- for cardio, Pilates, strength training, yoga and more -- are now available on dozens of sites for absolutely nada. The only thing they'll cost you is your patience: Most have less-than-perfect picture quality, a barrage of advertising and the occasional broadband hiccup or video lag to contend with.

But for the time-strapped individual who doesn't mind doing a squat thrust in front of a computer, these workouts are a perfect way to squeeze in a few minutes of exercise at home or in a hotel room, says Gregory Florez, chief executive of health coaching service fitadvisor.com and spokesman for the American Council on Exercise.

"Not only are these [free] workouts fresh, they can give you new ideas, and they're available to the person just getting started," Florez says. Plus they're available 24/7, unlike your running partner or the gym.

The hardest part is finding them. A Google search for "free online workouts" turns up a lot of sites that appear to be free, but most are merely peddling minute-long snippets of DVDs they want you to buy or a one-time sneak peek at paid-membership content. Even more frustrating is wading through the hundreds of thousands of fitness videos at sites like YouTube.

Don't worry -- we've done your homework for you. Read on for a sampler of some of the best Web workout sites and what you can expect from them.

SparkPeople (www.sparkpeople.com)

This 8-year-old diet-and-fitness site, established by EBay millionaire Chris Downie, is full of cardio, strength and Pilates routines to stream.

The no-frills workouts, videotaped in SparkPeople's Cincinnati offices, range in length from five to 20 minutes and can be put together as part of a free, customized diet-and-fitness plan for site members.

There are no hourlong workouts to be found on this site. The idea, Downie says, is to get beginning exercisers to commit to short ones rather than nothing at all.

"One of my favorite tips for people is to try to do 10 minutes of fitness every day," instead of shooting for the recommended 60 minutes, Downie says. "You'll end up doing more than 10." Downie says he founded the site after he logged 700 consecutive days of short exercise stints, greatly improving his health.

It's best for: With its calorie counters, recipes, fitness articles, message boards and support groups, this site is good for beginning exercisers hoping to make regular exercise a habit.

Exercise TV (www.exercisetv.tv)

This video-on-demand network offers its online audience a wide range of cardio, stretch and strength-training videos that are 10 to 45 minutes long, and shorter mini-workouts focusing on specific exercises or body parts.

The site features experienced instructors such as TV's "Biggest Loser" trainer Jillian Michaels and celebrity trainer Kendell Hogan. The videos are engaging, contain solid cuing and can be watched full-screen. They can also be downloaded for a few bucks.

This site is not without its glitches. The video is a little fuzzy at full screen and sometimes a bit choppy. The constant barrage of advertisements is an annoyance.

It's best for: Fitness junkies who crave variety and usually work out with DVDs will enjoy adding these workouts to the mix.

Yoga Journal (www.yogajournal.com)

Yogatoday

(www.yogatoday.com)

Both sites offer free yoga workouts from certified instructors.

Yoga Journal, the bible of yoga enthusiasts and teachers alike, offers weekly 20-minute studio podcasts from yogi Jason Crandell and 20-minute segments from its line of yoga DVDs. The 20-minute routines, which include energizing sequences, arm strengtheners and hip openers, can be streamed or downloaded to your computer from the site. You can also subscribe on iTunes. The picture quality is relatively good and the instruction competent.

Yogatoday features one 60-minute workout a day from an archive of 300 routines. Filmed outdoors in the rolling hills of Jackson Hole, Wyo., the setting is relaxing, but the video is grainy and occasionally lags the audio. Each routine has a different focus, such as "Yoga Postures for Surf and Snowboard Riders" or "Ashtanga Primary Series: Part II." Enter your e-mail address and you can receive a list of each week's classes. A short advertisement precedes the instruction.

They're best for: Yoga lovers who don't want to shell out \$15 for a studio class and runners who need a good stretch. However, they're probably not the safest place for a beginner to learn the basics.

Fitness magazine (www.fitnessmag.com)

Most of the major health and fitness magazines offer short videos that demonstrate exercises. But many of these are too short or too focused on expensive equipment that most people don't have.

Fitness magazine's video program allows you to build your own workout video by choosing areas you want to focus on, such as chest, arms and abs; the duration of time you want to exercise; and the equipment you have at home.

The instruction is solid and the exercises challenging. The only drawback? The model demonstrating the exercises doesn't do all of the repetitions, so you have to pause the video to finish doing all the reps before proceeding to the next exercise.

It's best for: Committed fitness enthusiasts who want to learn new moves and mix up their current routines.

Ultimate Pilates (www.ultimatepilates.com)

Created by twin sisters Katherine and Kimberly Corp, the founders of Pilates on Fifth in New York, this site offers seven free 30- to 45-minute Pilates mat workouts in addition to those offered to paying members.

The workouts feature basic Pilates moves in a no-frills studio setting, with an emphasis on proper form. Podcasts are also available to teach individual Pilates exercises.

It's best for: Beginners and intermediate Pilates exercisers. Most of the more advanced work is reserved for paying customers.

YouTube and other video viewing sites (www.youtube.com, www.veoh.com, , www.blinkx.com)

YouTube offers a huge number of exercise videos from certified professionals and amateurs alike. However, most of these videos are too short to make up a full workout and a lot of them are more about what the instructor is wearing (or not wearing) than they are about form or technique.

The best way to find routines that strike your fancy is to search by keyword such as "dance fitness" or "pilates ball" and use the "advanced options" tab at the top to select a longer duration and a language.

You can also search by instructor. Several eight-minute-long snippets of fitness guru Billy Blanks' kickboxing workouts can be found here and linked together to make a workout, if you have the patience.

There are also interesting 10-minute workouts from people you might not have heard of, such as Paul Eugene, a peppy Pittsburgh-based fitness instructor with his own local cable show, or Steve, a fit amateur who works out with a mini-trampoline in his backyard.

Other video viewing sites such as Veoh, Joost and Blinkx also require you to search by keyword to avoid wading through a bunch of junk. Though they seem to have fewer instruction videos, the ones they have appear to be from more qualified, experienced instructors.

They're best for: Anyone looking for variety -- there's lots of that here. But, FitAdvisor's Florez says, there's also more of a risk of injury when amateurs are demonstrating exercises without proper focus on technique and alignment. That means some of these videos may be better for experienced exercisers.

And if someone's trying to figure out a specific technique such as the arm position on a bent-over-row, "for that, it's great," Florez says.