THREE STAGES OF AEROBIC FITNESS

You may have heard that aerobic exercise is the most efficient way to improve overall fitness. This is mostly true, but there is more to overall success in fitness than aerobic exercise. It is the necessary first step to improve overall fitness; and it is certainly the quickest step in the process.

“Getting Fit” involves three major steps that occur in this order. Be aware, the human body is pretty wise to shortcuts!

The Three Major Steps

1. **Aerobic Fitness** – your heart and lungs get used to processing more blood and oxygen and your cardiovascular system responds by becoming more efficient. Major gains in aerobic fitness can occur in as little as 4-6 weeks.

2. **Muscle Fitness** – your muscles adapt to the increase in exercise by getting stronger. This process takes a bit longer – about 8-16 weeks.

3. **Musculoskeletal Fitness** – your bones, tendons, ligaments, and joints adapt to having a better cardiovascular system and stronger muscles. This process takes the longest time of all – about 3-6 months! (Depending on your beginning fitness level.)

Whenever you try to shortcut the process, the human body usually responds with its most noticeable message – pain. Pain is the body’s defense mechanism and it can be employed at any time during these three major steps of getting fit. There are few things more discouraging than to get hurt after “I put all that time in exercising.” Listen to your heart, literally, and many of those aches and pains will never appear.

Pain is highly avoidable if you exercise patience. You have all been told to avoid huffing & puffing and to keep your pace at a “conversation level.” The primary reason is to keep your heart rate in the right zone. The aerobic zone is between 60-80% of maximum heart rate. Keeping it there for 3-6 months during the majority of your workouts will allow your body to adapt gradually to your new level of fitness. Follow this advice and you will be truly amazed at how much higher that new level will be 6 months from now!

Monitoring heart rate, during & after training, is a great tool to develop and maintain proper workouts. Heart rate gives immediate feedback on how the body is responding to exercise and to the conditions of the particular day. (See Factors Affecting Your Heart Rate.) The pulse is a direct measure of the effort being put on the heart and the body. Trust it! It’s the best indicator we’ve got.