



How Long Does It Take To Form a Healthy Habit?

For a few years, my husband and I had a friendly fitness challenge that lasted from Thanksgiving through New Year's Day. The challenge was to exercise for at least 30 minutes each day, without fail. Believe me, it really was a challenge some days. I can recall a very cold, windy walk on a dark Christmas night; setting up an at-home boot camp in the family room one day when the YMCA was closed; and fitting in a late-night yoga session when I realized, well past dinner, that I hadn't done anything even remotely resembling exercise that day.

What I learned from our holiday challenge was that making exercise a habit made it a lot more likely I would fit it into my day. There wasn't a question of whether or not it was a workout day. Was it a day? Then I was going to work out.

Motivational speaker and lifestyle coach James Clear wrote an interesting blog post about how habits are formed. Clear writes there is a prevailing myth that it takes 21 days to form a new habit, all based on the misinterpretation of 1950s plastic surgeon Maxwell Maltz's work on self-image. After performing an operation, Maltz noticed it took patients about 21 days to get used to their changed appearance. Maltz then realized it took him about 21 days to change his own ingrained behaviors, too. Contemplating this, he wrote, "These, and many other commonly observed phenomena tend to show that it requires a minimum of about 21 days for an old mental image to dissolve and a new one to jell." And so the myth.

A more realistic time frame for developing a new habit was published in the *European Journal of Social Psychology*. Phillippa Lally, a health psychology researcher at University College London, and her colleagues, studied 96 people and discovered that, on average, it takes 66 days before a

new behavior becomes automatic. Depending on the person and the behavior, those studied took anywhere from 18 to 254 days to form a new habit — which means it could take nearly eight months before some people are compelled to do some things without having to think about doing them.

The United States Department of Health and Human Services recommends healthy adults do at least 150 minutes of moderate or 75 minutes of vigorous aerobic exercise, plus two strength-training sessions, each week. Of course, it also recommends 30 minutes of exercise a day, which means you are really aiming for 210 minutes a week. And then it goes on to recommend 300 minutes a week if you are trying to improve your health or lose weight.

All of this goes back to the success I experienced participating in the holiday fitness challenge. Every day I participated I was getting closer to that 66-day mark, closer to making exercise a habit. Not only did it become easier to do whatever I was doing (running, swimming, lifting weights), I began to simply expect I would be doing it.

Creating a new habit, for good or ill, seems to be a matter of simple repetition. Go home from work each night, sit down on the couch, turn on the television, and do nothing. Repeat for 66 nights. Bad habit formed. Go home from work each night, put on gym clothes, hit the gym for a workout. Repeat for 66 nights. Good habit formed. It might be science, but it's not rocket science. Anyone can do it. Even me. I think it's time I got started. ✨

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