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Nolan: Target Heart Rate – Use it to gauge your exercise intensity

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by InMaricopa - Jul 15, 2016



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By Craig Nolan

Most people know that regularly engaging in cardiovascular exercise is beneficial to the body in many ways. Some of these benefits include the following: strengthens the heart muscle, increases metabolism, improves lung function, increases energy, and decreases fat. What many people don't know is the level of intensity they should be exercising at. Typically the intensity of cardiovascular exercise is determined by how many times your heart beats per minute. There is a simple formula to use to figure out if you are exercising at an optimal level.

The first step in determining your target heart rate is to calculate what your Maximum Heart Rate (MHR) is. This is determined in the following way: $220 - \text{Age} = \text{Maximum Heart Rate (MHR)}$. I am currently 44 years old so my Target Heart Rate would be calculated in the following manner: $220 - 44 = 176$.

The second step is deciding upon the intensity of the exercise. The American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) uses the following percentages to assist you in determining your ideal target heart rate. **Beginners** should calculate their target heart rate at **50 to 65 percent** of their maximum heart rate. **Intermediate** exercisers should calculate their target heart rate at **60 to 75 percent** of their maximum heart rate. **Advanced** exercisers should calculate their target heart rate at **70 to 85 percent** of their maximum heart rate. It is best to calculate your target heart rate using both percentages that way you have a range to adhere to.



I will use myself as an example again to determine how I would calculate my target heart rate.

Step 1: $220 - \text{age} \quad 220 - 44 = 176$

Step 2: $176 \times .7 = 123$ beats per minute (bpm)

Step 3: $176 \times .85 = 150$ beats per minute (bpm)

Target heart rate = 123 to 150 beats per minute

As you can see from my example this is a very basic calculation. The final step is knowing how to properly take a pulse. Proper location is everything when taking a pulse. The two most common locations for finding your pulse is at the wrist and the side of your neck.

The radial pulse is located at the base of your thumb. With your opposing hand place two finger tips on this area (do not use your opposing thumb) and feel for the pulse. The carotid pulse is located by pressing the finger tips against the side of the trachea aka "windpipe."

When taking a pulse during exercise it is best to take the pulse for 15 seconds and then multiply the beats time four. Sometimes it can be difficult to get an accurate count when trying to count pulses for 60 seconds and exercising at the same time.

If you find that checking your pulse is too difficult while exercising I would recommend purchasing a wireless heart rate monitor. This takes the hassle out of checking your pulse and these wireless monitors are much more accurate than the hand held monitors found on many cardiovascular exercise machines.

Determining your target heart rate is important for many reasons. One of the most important reasons is to avoid under or overtraining. If you are undertraining you are less likely to meet your fitness goals. If you are overtraining you may be susceptible to injury.

References

Melone, L. (2012, January 13). American College of Sports Medicine. Retrieved July 15, 2016, from <http://www.acsm.org/>

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