



Your Heart Rate: Ma'am, Do you Know How Fast You Were Going?

Exercising aerobically without a heart rate monitor is much like driving a car without a speedometer. Doesn't make much sense, now does it?

Monitoring your heart rate measures your exercise intensity—the harder the work, the higher the heart rate (though other factors, such as the shape you are in and medications like beta blockers do come into play).

Many people use the simple “rate of perceived exertion” (or RPE) to measure exercise intensity. RPE is just your own opinion of how hard an activity feels to *you* while you're actually doing it. The downside to RPE is that it's not entirely accurate. There are other factors that affect your RPE versus how hard you are actually working, like how much sleep you've gotten, how much you've worked out that week, and if you're a woman, where in your menstrual cycle you are.

Measuring your actual heart rate (rather using than RPE) helps you vary the intensity of your exercise. (Remember the Shock! Method?) Some days you want to exercise at a steady rate, building your stamina and burning more fat as your energy source. Other days you want to do harder intervals, increasing your power and heart output, while burning more calories.

(Side note: though there's debate about fat-burning zones versus interval training, aerobic zones from 70–85% of your maximum heart rate do use more fat as primary fuel to keep you going. Intervals, on the other hand—working in the 65%–92% range—use more of your muscles' sugars. However, intervals burn more calories overall than steady-state aerobic training, so in all reality—in terms of weight loss—they are the same. You need both for variety and to train and shock your body).

Ready to put your heart rate to the test? Buy an inexpensive heart rate monitor. (Get the least expensive base model that does nothing but measure your heart rate. It doesn't tell you how many calories you've burned, which is not accurate, anyway, and won't cook your dinner. It simply tells you how hard you are working.)

Go to the links below and calculate your maximum and working zone heart rates (65%, 75%, 85%, and 92%). For more accuracy, take a look at the “Karvonen method” of calculating your individual training zones. General heart rate recommendations are not that accurate, and Karvonen gives you a better number tailored to you.

To know your body is to know your heart rate.

Heart rate calculators:

www.active.com/fitness/calculators/hearttrate.htm
walking.about.com/cs/calories/l/blcalchearttrate.htm

Karvonen method of calculating heart rate (preferred):

www.sparkpeople.com/resource/calculator_target.asp
www.fitwatch.com/qkcalc/thr.html