

Hardgainer No More

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If you're an ectomorph and you think making some key changes in your workout — like doing more compound movements and using heavier weights for fewer reps — is going to solve your problem, you're only half right. (For our purposes, an ectomorph is a hardgainer with a fast metabolism who has difficulty putting on size and weight.) You can't neglect the importance of dietary habits, recuperation and lifestyle factors. Last month, we discussed how you can customize your workout to speed up your gains; this month we'll examine the other side of the equation.

If you take bodybuilding seriously, I know you're taking yourself to the limit in the gym. Remember, though the physiological processes that promote muscular growth are initiated during your workouts, growth actually occurs while your body is at rest. If you take a closer look, perhaps these factors are what's limiting your development. Ten important points can help you optimize your muscle size:

1) If you have trouble putting on weight, you can't get around the fact that you need to increase your food intake by about 300-500 calories daily. The easiest way to do this is to eat 5-6 smaller meals each day. If you're on the go or at the office, bring several small meals with you. Include yogurt, fruit, a chicken or turkey sandwich, a small bowl of pasta, etc.

2) Try to get about 30-40 grams of protein with each meal. You want to eat approximately 1 gram per pound of body-weight each day. Individual amino acids that make up protein are the raw materials that build muscle tissue.

3) Don't be afraid of fats — that is, healthy fats. Saturated fats clog arteries, but unsaturated fats provide important vitamins, keep cells and nerves healthy and provide energy and the cholesterol that helps to make testosterone, an important muscle-building hormone. Fats should comprise about 25% of your total daily calories.

4) Make sure you eat a high-protein, high-carb meal within 30 minutes after your workout (which refuels your muscles), and consume another high-protein snack an hour before bedtime (providing additional amino acids for building muscle as you sleep).

5) Recuperation is an often-overlooked factor. Because you burn calories so easily, doing more training can actually hurt your progress. Schedule a greater number of rest days — as many as 3-4 a week.

6) Sleep is important to recuperation. Get as much as your body needs and take a nap in the afternoon if time allows. Pulling all-nighters in school and partying till the wee hours will hurt your bodybuilding progress.

7) Don't train if you're tired or still sore from your last workout.

8) Don't let your outside activities undermine your gains, either. If you participate in another sport or energy-draining activity, pay extra attention to nutritional and recovery factors.

9) That goes for aerobic conditioning, too. Working your cardiorespiratory system is a smart idea for all bodybuilders (it'll also help you achieve superior muscle definition), but use a lower intensity level and work out no more than 20-30 minutes 3-4 days a week.

10) Keep stress levels low by learning how to relax, using such techniques as visualization, yoga and meditation. Stress-induced high cortisol levels can be detrimental to muscle-building.

If you can identify problems and make changes in several of these areas — combined with the modifications in your training that we discussed last month — you'll finally start to break out of your ectomorphic shell if you stick with it. Next month, we'll talk about those naturally muscular mesomorphs who seem to make gains quickly and how they can fine-tune their workouts to make the fastest possible improvements. **M&F**

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