

A burst of activity; With a little tweaking the 7-minute workout could be what many Canadians are seeking

It's no wonder the 7-Minute Workout took the world by storm when it debuted in 2013, promising a full-body workout in just a few minutes a day.

One of the first workouts to demonstrate the power of high intensity interval training (HIIT) to the general public, it consists of 12 body weight exercises (squats, two variations of pushups, jumping jacks, lunges, dips, step-ups, wall sits, crunches, two variations of planks, running on the spot) performed in 30-second bursts with a 10-second rest between each exercise. The only equipment needed is a chair, making it perfect not just for time-crunched exercisers, but for travellers, apartment dwellers and anyone else who doesn't want to invest in a home gym.

Still popular four years later, the workout has spawned several apps that have been downloaded millions of times by people excited by the promise of getting all the exercise they need in a matter of minutes. But now that the dust has settled and high intensity interval training has been more rigorously tested, how does the 7-Minute Workout measure up to other HIIT workouts?

A research team from California State University San Marcos decided to put the 7-Minute Workout to the test, comparing it to a traditional HIIT session performed on a bike. The idea was to see whether intensity levels recorded for the 7-Minute Workout are high enough to qualify as a HIIT session. Noting that the results of HIIT workouts are based primarily on research performed in a lab using top-quality equipment, a well-defined workout protocol and staff who make sure the exercisers stay on track, the researchers wanted to see if a home-based program like the 7-Minute Workout, in which intensity is based on the exerciser's own motivation, is worthy of its "scientifically based" promise of improved fitness and weight loss.

The first step was getting height, weight and VO2 max scores from 14 recreational exercisers (seven men and seven women), aged 19 to 45. Once the baseline measurements were taken, each exerciser performed both the 7-Minute Workout and a cycling HIIT, with a two-day break between the physical tests. The cycling workout mimicked the 7-Minute Workout, demanding a dozen 30-second bouts of high-intensity pedalling (at 70 per cent of peak power) followed by 10 seconds of active rest (20 per cent of peak power), for a total of six minutes of active work.

The results showed that the cycling intervals were more physically demanding than the intervals in the 7-Minute Workout, producing a greater demand for oxygen, a higher heart rate and a higher level of perceived exertion.

That doesn't mean the 7-Minute Workout was a walk in the park. Several times during the workout, the intensity matched that of the cycling test. The problem is that not all exercises in the 7-Minute Workout demand the same level of intensity, which lowered the overall effectiveness of the workout.

"Heart rate and VO2 (Oxygen consumption) were highest when dynamic lower-body exercise including high knees, lunges, step-ups onto a chair and squats were performed," stated the researchers, "whereas lower VO2 and heart rate were evident when participants completed small muscle mass exercise (triceps dip), passive exercise (wall sit), or were supine, as in the case of planks and abdominal crunches."

The solution for those who want to make the workout a little tougher is to swap out some of the less-intense exercises in favour of ones that will keep the heart pumping, allowing for a more consistent level of intensity. The authors suggest "dynamic, multi-joint movements including burpees, deadlifts and/or box jumps" in place of wall sits, planks, crunches and tricep dips.

The changes are worth considering, given that the convenience of the 7-Minute Workout makes it a great option on days when a longer, more traditional workout isn't in the cards. Even better, it doesn't require a lot of equipment, which means you can do it anywhere, any time. And with so many apps that take you through the whole workout, including timing each interval, it couldn't be easier.

Just remember: if you want to get the most out of your seven minutes, choose an app that allows you to build your own bank of exercises.

Or better yet, one that allows you to create your own 7-Minute Workout.

With a little tweaking, it has the potential to be one of the most effective home-based workouts for time-and cash-strapped Canadians of all fitness levels.

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7 Minute Bodyweight High Intensity Circuit Training Workout

- 30 seconds at each exercise
- 10 seconds recovery
- Perform as a circuit
- Repeat 2-3 times if time allows

Warm-up:

- Walking w arms up/down 30 secs
- Walking w arms across chest 30 secs
- Jog 30 secs
- Lateral shuffle 30 secs
- Mountain climbers 30 secs
- 5 push-ups, 5 squats, 5 lunges

Circuit:

1. Jumping Jacks
2. Wall sit
3. Push-ups
4. Crunch
5. Step-up
6. Squats
7. Triceps dips
8. Front plank
9. High knees
10. Lunge
11. Push-up with rotation
12. Side plank

