

Ready, set...slow

Can you get strong and toned in just 20 minutes, two times a week? Yes—if your muscles can handle the slow burn.

By Liz Plosser

Keith and Denise Morton have the toned, lithe bodies of twentysomethings who spend hours a day sweating buckets in the gym. But they're in their fifties, they don't do cardio, and they only spend 20 to 40 minutes in the gym—each week. Their svelte secret is a twice-weekly exercise regimen called SuperSlow. It's available at their CityWide SuperSlow facility, the only Chicago venue to offer the world-renowned program.

The idea behind SuperSlow exercise—a six-machine circuit that works every major muscle group—is that participants lift a heavy, challenging load at a snail-slow pace of 20 seconds per repetition (ten seconds to lift, ten seconds to lower) for a total of two minutes per set (or until muscle failure). By eliminating momentum, muscles are isolated and experience a prolonged, isolated contraction.



Photograph by Stephanie Willis

The routine may sound like a blip on the fitness-fad radar, but it's been around for more than 20 years and has scientific support. Trainer Ken Hutchins developed the system in 1982 at the University of Florida, where he was working with osteoporotic women. The women were too frail to complete normal reps, so Hutchins had them lift as slowly (and safely) as possible.

The results were shocking: Folks who had been confined to walkers were suddenly mobile on their own two feet. Other studies have suggested that the method results in 50 percent greater strength gains than typical weight training. Plus, many researchers think the metabolic benefits of building muscle mass make weight lifting a more efficient way to torch calories than cardio.

Part of the appeal of SuperSlow is its short time commitment. But don't misunderstand—like I did—and think that "short" is the same as "easy." It's hard—*really* hard. Denise took me through a circuit, which began with a leg-press machine (the facility uses medically designed MED-X equipment). By rep No. 3 my leg muscles were quivering and sweat was dripping down my face; by rep No. 5 I was visibly shaking and shooting Denise devil eyes. But she was unfazed, glancing at her stopwatch while counting out the seconds, correcting my form and reminding me to breathe.

We finished the set and it was on to the next machine—no rest break, no chitchat, no time to get my heart rate down again. The overhead-press machine was just as hard, but I started getting the hang of the long reps and keeping a continuous motion to prevent momentum from kicking in. I left the facility (in 20 minutes flat) feeling completely fatigued. Wow, that was intense, I thought. Days later I tried to replicate the experience by myself at the gym, but without Denise, I couldn't push myself even close to as hard.

Because of the intensity of each session, CityWide will only let its clients train two times a week, with at least three rest days between sessions. Experts say it takes about four to six weeks to notice an aesthetic difference in your muscle tone, but after two weeks of trial sessions my arms were firmer and stronger. Truth be told, I won't give up cardio—I depend on it for stress relief. But if money were no object, SuperSlow would be a permanent component of my workout routine.

\$50 per session, discounts available on packages. 2232 N Clybourn Ave, suite 200 (773-281-7539, www.citywidesuperslow.com).