

In a hurry? Try SuperSlow

Focus on muscle, form in low-maintenance workout

By Monica Eng
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For most time-crunched urbanites—especially a certain single working mom I know—the idea of a “super slow” workout sounds about as attractive as getting a super-slow spinal tap while waiting in a super-slow grocery line behind a person trying to use a Jil-lion coupon.

No, thanks. We barely have time for the super-fast workouts we try to squeeze into our lives.

But names can be deceptive. Turns out SuperSlow exercise routines are actually *ideal* for folks in a hurry. Each workout—done no more than twice a week—lasts fewer than 30 minutes. And after that, “No other form of ‘exercise’ is needed,” according to the Web site for Lincoln Park’s CityWide SuperSlow facility.

One hour of exercise a week and I’m done? Woo-hoo. Where do I sign up?

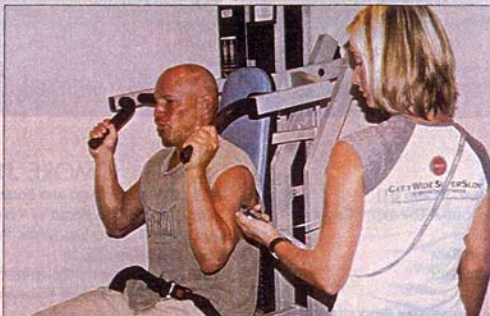
Well, one place where you can is at CityWide SuperSlow, where I made an appointment with personal trainer Andrew Sherwood. My first session was a one-hour introductory class that was high explanation and half workout.

Sherwood started by reviewing my health information and laying out the SuperSlow philosophy. Developed in the 1980s by David Hutchins at the University of Florida Medical School, its first guinea pigs were retired women with osteoporosis whose conditions improved markedly when they embarked on slow, gentle weight training with Nautilus machines. The idea is that these measured and concentrated movements build muscle much more quickly, safely and effectively than fast, jarring repetitions.

A typical routine involves very controlled repetitions (about 10 seconds up and 10 seconds down) on Nautilus-style machines, working the particular muscle groups until they exhaust themselves at about two minutes. This process is repeated on a circuit of machines until the 20 to 30 minutes are up. By the end of each two-minute cycle, your muscles are flooded with a hot rush of lactic acid and pain that takes about 48 hours to recover from.

As I went through the beginner’s circuit (exercising my thighs, shoulders, biceps, forearms and abs), each of my movements was carefully monitored, timed, charted and coached by Sherwood. He encouraged me, counted for me, reminded me to breathe and let me know when I’d hit the minute mark or should hold my position. This guy would have made a great birthing coach.

And, yes, the pain that invades your muscles is not unlike the pain you feel in childbirth. The good news is that the agony never lasts more



Shep Gould trains at CityWide SuperSlow with certified instructor Katie Pine (right). The workout features slow, controlled repetitions until the muscle group being worked is exhausted. (Photo courtesy of CityWide SuperSlow)

CityWide SuperSlow

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A one-hour introductory session costs \$40 with subsequent individual sessions priced at \$50 each. You can also buy a package of classes at a discount, and no membership fees are required.

than two minutes. The bad news is that these are some of the longest two minutes of your life. No wonder SuperSlow is always done with a personal trainer. Even if you had a stopwatch and could monitor your time, few people would have the discipline to avoid cheating if no one was watching.

Sherwood warned me that I would feel some soreness in a couple of days. Instead, I felt it the moment I walked out of the studio and kept feeling it—especially in my arms and shoulders—for at least 72 hours, through regular doses of Motrin.

On each machine Sherwood adjusted and recorded my settings for the best form, maximum effectiveness and minimum chance of injury. This created a lag between each exercise. But then, theoretically, all of the stats and settings would be ready to go for my next workout.

But is SuperSlow all you really need for all-around fitness? Critics allow that it does build muscle quickly. But SuperSlow “is not sufficient for overall fitness and it will not give you

the combination of strength, flexibility and cardiovascular benefits you’d get through something like Pilates and aerobic exercise,” says Glenn Gaesser, a professor of exercise physiology and director of the adult fitness program at the University of Virginia.

Gaesser also thinks—and says at least one study bears out—that the intensity (read: pain) of the routine makes it a difficult regimen to stick with. “I would tell people to try it, because that’s all you need to tell you [how painful it is].”

Despite these criticisms, the workout’s lasting popularity seems to indicate that someone is sticking with it. Acquaintances attest to rock-hard muscles and great tone in a hurry. I even started to see some toning after my first sessions. But am I going to give up running and Pilates? No, mostly because I’m happy with the muscle I’ve got.

SuperSlow enjoyed a surge of popularity about five years ago but is still practiced at gyms around the Chicago area, either exclusively or as part of wider variety of personal training options. Some even waive the fee for the first session.

Karen Heffernan’s Strength Club offers slow strength training at four north suburban locations (strengthclub.net), and Michael Wolff Fitness offers it in Elgin and St. Charles (wolfffitness.com).