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You Don't Need to Spend a Lot to Stretch Your Fitness Dollar

By Howard Schneider

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I haven't seen it documented yet, but you can be certain that with unemployment rising, incomes stagnant and a brooding sense of uncertainty about what is ahead for the economy, gym memberships and personal training sessions are on the chopping block in many household budgets.

But giving up the fancy venue and the personal attention doesn't have to mean giving up altogether. For a minimal investment -- say a hundred bucks or less -- you can assemble the tools needed to get (or keep) yourself in shape.

You can stick to running and walking through the neighborhood. If you keep the shoes laced and the feet moving, that will go a long way toward keeping you healthy. But it won't do much to enhance your flexibility and upper body strength or help maintain your ability to bend and twist and turn. For that, it helps to have a couple of simple items from the local sports store and a willingness to learn how to use them.

When I asked local trainer Michael Everts, owner of [Fit](#) in Dupont Circle, what he'd recommend to someone who wants to stay in shape on the cheap, he boiled it down to two items: a yoga or Pilates mat (\$20 to \$25, and a lot more stable and cushioning and better to sweat on than an old blanket) and a set of elastic resistance bands. ([Thera-Band](#) is the major brand name, but you'll find knockoffs at the big-box stores for as little as \$15 for a pack of three.)

I gulped a bit when he said this. Elastic bands, strips of rubber color-coded to indicate different levels of resistance, are often associated with physical therapy, where they're used to help get injured or malfunctioning joints and muscles back into working order.

But, as Everts explained it, resistance is resistance. It doesn't much matter if you are lifting a dumbbell or a milk jug full of water, or pulling on a rubber band, as long as the muscles have to overcome *something*. For a lot of staple exercises, he said, a couple of bands can provide the same effect as several pairs of dumbbells, for a lot less money (and a lot less space and clutter).

Lie on one (or wrap it beneath a bench) for a chest press. Stand on it to do shoulder presses and biceps curls. Tie it to a door handle for back rows; throw it over the top of the door and grab the two hanging ends for triceps push-downs. If the intensity seems inadequate, double them over, or use two bands at once.

"They are a full-body piece of equipment," Everts said.

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Rubber tubes (also at the big-box stores and inexpensive) are an alternative. But in my experience the wide elastic bands work better. They are easier to grip and wrap around your hands if you want to increase the resistance. Both have the advantage of being portable, an easy way to take your gym on the road.

With the upper body finished, Everts recommended body weight exercises for the legs and hips: standard moves such as squats, lunges and calf raises. If you're just starting, you can use a chair to assist with the squats; even sitting and standing a few times is a beginning. For lunges you can put your hand on a chair or table for assistance. If you want to increase the intensity, experiment with combining upper- and lower-body exercises: Stand on the band, for example, and as you rise from a squat, do a shoulder press; or tie the band around your shoe, and as you step into a lunge, do a biceps curl.

For the abdominal and core muscles, Everts's scaled-down, no-machines-or-dumbbells-needed routine involved five exercises done on the mat, with 30 repetitions each. They should be done in order ("synergistically," he said) to take advantage of how the different abdominal muscles work together. All are done lying on your back.

- 1. Hip thrusts: With legs in the air, push the hips up and the toes toward the ceiling.
- 2. Oblique crunches: With the hands behind the head, raise the right shoulder off the ground and rotate toward the left thigh; after 30 repetitions, do the same thing with the other side.
- 3. Standard crunches.
- 4. Reverse crunches: With knees bent, raise the legs toward the chest.
- 5. Lifts: With the legs in the air, raise the shoulders off the ground, but, rather than "crunching," push the chest toward the ceiling.

Jason Riddell, head strength and conditioning coach at American University, added another dimension to the idea, coming at the problem as someone who spends his days trying to tweak an extra bit of power out of the college's athletes, while working in his own sets of 300-pound-plus squats.

His on-the-cheap gym would include a jump rope, a pull-up bar, a six- to eight-pound medicine ball, and a [Jumpstretch](#) band, which is basically an industrial-strength rubber band, popular with conditioning coaches.

A couple of these are pretty obvious. Jumping rope is a powerful cardio exercise. The medicine ball is a versatile tool, useful for abdominal twists, playing various types of catch if you have a partner, adding resistance to crunches and squats, or simply raising overhead and slamming to the ground. (Yes, people do that.)

The pull-up bar may be difficult to accommodate. There are various models designed to fit in doorways that may or may not work for your home. If that's not a problem, the pull-ups themselves may be difficult anyway. These are one of the exercises that many trainers and athletic coaches recommend because they recruit so much muscle: chest, back, abs and arms all at the same time.

They are also hard as heck. Many people can't do them at all. That's where the Jumpstretch band comes in. Big, closed-loop pieces of rubber, in the thickest version they offer up to 200 pounds of resistance. (The term is used loosely here because resistance with these is not fixed, and it increases as the band is stretched.)

The light versions (the purple one offers a 50-pound resistance and can be ordered online for about \$18) can be used to do assisted pull-ups. Looping it through the bar, step into the end that is hanging down and let your body weight stretch the band out. The resistance of the band will help pull you up.

They can also be used for some other exercises popular among weightlifters, including the "good morning": With the band looped over the head and secured to the floor with the feet, bend at the waist and try to straighten, lifting with the hamstrings and gluteal muscles. You can also strengthen the knees by standing on the band, grabbing opposite sides with the hands so it forms an X, and walking sideways.

If you are serious about ditching the gym, books can help. The recently published "No Gym Required," by Jennifer Cohen, is a bit chatty but includes a nice set of body-weight and other home-based exercises. She works wonders with a kitchen chair and has lots of recommendations for using an inflatable stability ball (another good investment, at maybe \$20 to \$30).

A final idea: Shop for some discount DVDs for instruction in yoga, cardio, Pilates, martial arts or other different types of exercise. The variety will be beneficial.

And be patient. The economy may take years to turn around, so we could be in the basement for a long time to come.

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