



Trainer Andrew Cox gives Ben Sin a workout on the Power Plate.
Photos: Edward Wong, May Tse

A twitch in time...

Vibration training is taking shape in Hong Kong. Ben Sin gets a whole lot of shakin' goin' on

The premise in vibration training is simple. The fitness machines are equipped with a vibrating plate that users exercise on to stimulate muscle contractions at a rate so fast (between 20 and 60 times per second) that the body experiences the effects of a full-on, strenuous workout in a fraction of the time.

Vibration training dates back to the 1960s, when Russian scientists developed the machines to help cosmonauts combat the effects of a decrease in muscle mass and bone density from the lack of gravity in space. Its benefits were next used in Russian ballet and, later, by big names such as former cyclist Lance Armstrong and the NBA.

Vibration training made its Hong Kong debut in 2007 when Andrew Cox, master trainer for the US-based National Academy of Sports Medicine, introduced the Power Plate brand of machines to Innate Fitness, a company he founded. Two other brands, TurboSonic and iShape, became available last year.

It works, says Dr Billy Law Kin-yip, of the faculty of medicine at the Hong Kong Jockey Club Sports Medicine and Health Sciences Centre. He adds: "Vibration training benefits those who haven't exercised regularly more than those who are normally active."

Because of its low-impact nature, it is an ideal form of exercise for the elderly, Law says. "In fact, several hospitals ... have these machines."

With each brand of machines claiming superiority, we decided to give them a go.

Power Plate

I have just finished a 30-second squatting exercise on the Power Plate, when Cox says: "What you just

did is equivalent to carrying me on your back for 10 minutes."

Judging from my wobbly legs after just a few minutes of drills on the machine, I believe him. Power Plate terms this – and trademarked the term – "acceleration training".

"Due to the mechanical vibration produced by the plate, your body is reacting involuntarily to the loss of balance – your muscles are working to maintain balance, even if you're just standing there," Cox explains.

The vibrations basically increase the gravitational forces – or acceleration – on your body, making you work as you move against them. It is similar to traditional exercise: working your muscles by increasing mass, usually by lifting weights. But with the Power Plate, the high-impact and high stress factors of weightlifting are reduced.

Cox, who prefers variations of light exercises, such as squats, push-ups and minor weightlifting, says this workout can't be replicated with conventional exercise. "When you combine the machine with minor weightlifting, it smashes the beejesus out of fat."

My wobbly legs believe him.

TurboSonic

Developed in 2000, a year after the Power Plate's debut, the TurboSonic differs in that it uses soundwaves to create vibrations.

Strength and conditioning coach Anfernee Leung, spokesman for TurboSonic in Hong Kong, says its vibrations – created using amplifiers and speaker systems – has advantages over motor-created rumbles.

"The vibrations are more natural and smooth, not restricted to just up-and-down and left-to-right," he says. "This allows for more variation in the vibrations, which we can use

to target specific body parts."

I stand still on the machine as he changes the settings. "You feel that?" he asks. "By changing the vibration, I've now targeted your stomach."

From the easy light drills he puts me through (including stretches and crunches on the circular, rubber-padded plate), my impression is that the TurboSonic is aimed at an older demographic.

"Yes, our main client base consists of elderly women and stroke victims," says Leung, who opened Core Functional Fitness with a partner last year. Training on the TurboSonic can improve circulation and muscle tone, and is great for rehabilitation from strokes and Parkinson's disease because it improves balance.

Will it make me more buff? I ask. "No," Leung says, "but I'm sceptical that the other machines will, either."

iShape

The iShape is the latest addition to the vibration training market from Taiwanese company Magtonic. Released last year, it works in virtually the same way as the PowerPlate, except it has a spiderweb-like stretching cage, in which users can do various poses not possible on the other machines.

Pure Fitness Two IFC is the only place in Hong Kong with this machine, and personal trainer George Cheng Kwok-choi says it's been very popular with women.

"The iShape has three functions: it helps stretching by increasing your range of motion, it strengthens muscles and it massages," he says.

Lying on the floor with my legs on the vibrating plate, Cheng applies pressure on my legs, and the sensation does feel like a massage. Next comes a series of simple stretching exercises, in which I have

to hold on to the spider-cage while contorting my body in various ways. Supposedly, 30 seconds of this increase my body's range of motion up to five centimetres. A toe-touch test after the drill confirms this.

"The biggest benefit of vibration training, to me, is it allows one to work their muscle fibres without the risk of high-impact exercises," Cheng explains.

The verdict

After three straight days of vibration training, I can confirm that it lives up to the claims for the most part – I feel tired and sore quicker doing exercises on the machine than I would have normally.

While all three machines offer similar workouts, the motor-based PowerPlate and iShape seem to cater to more active exercisers looking to break a sweat, while the soundwave vibrations of the

TurboSonic are more suitable for a lighter workout.

Cheng suggests using vibration training to warm up. "One way is to use it to get your circulation and flexibility going before, say, jogging on the treadmill," he says. "Vibration training won't replace cardio, but it can strengthen your body to sustain longer periods of cardio."

I find the machine is best for lower-body training – the throbbing, burning sense of muscle fatigue I get from simply squatting on the vibration plate for 30 seconds rivals some of the toughest basketball squatting drills of my high school years. Upper-body drills didn't have nearly the same result.

"It's not a miracle machine; you still have to work, but you can do it faster and more efficiently," says Siqi Yu, a regular PowerPlate user at Pure Fitness.

ben.sin@scmp.com

SHAKE A LEG

Power Plate

Innate Fitness at Optimum Performance Studio.
2/F, 50 Stanley Street, Central; 9263 3991

Private one-on-one 30-minute session: HK\$480

Power Plate class (in groups of four) HK\$400 each; HK\$1,800 for package of five classes

TurboSonic

Core Functional Fitness.
20/F, Quality Education Tower, 476 Nathan Road, Yau Ma Tei; 2770 8783
Private one-on-one 60-minute session: HK\$600

iShape

Pure Fitness. Level 3, Two IFC, 8 Finance Street, Central; 8129 2200



George Cheng demonstrates the use of the motor-based iShape machine