

Air Force might eliminate mandatory PT

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RAMSTEIN AIR BASE, Germany — Even as the Air Force prepares to toughen physical fitness standards for airmen, it's proposing to do away with mandatory physical training.

That means commanders no longer would have to provide airmen at least 270 minutes per week to exercise during duty hours. But airmen would still have to be prepared to pass more stringent PT tests twice a year.

If approved, the Air Force would be the first of the military services



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Airmen from the 86th Aircraft Maintenance Squadron run a practice physical training test Monday during unit PT at Ramstein's fitness center. Under new proposed guidelines, unit PT would no longer be mandatory, making the Air Force the first service to do away with such a provision.

to eliminate mandatory PT.

An internal audit last year found the Air Force's fitness program did not promote year-round fitness. Thirty-five percent of airmen tested at 13 bases worldwide gained weight and recorded significant increases in abdominal circumference measurements within 60 days of taking their PT test, auditors reported.

To combat those problems, the new standards would include twice yearly, instead of annual, testing, a revised point system, fewer chances to fail before being discharged, and assessments conducted by civilian health experts, rather than fellow airmen.

But two months before they're to be rolled out, the revised guidelines have yet to be signed by Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Norton Schwartz. Air Force officials said a review of the guidelines delayed the expected September release of the instruction.

Airmen, however, are already sounding off about the



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Tech. Sgts. John Sherman and Vincent Garcia, from the left, both airmen from the 86th Aircraft Maintenance Squadron, coach their peers through a physical fitness practice test Monday during unit PT at Ramstein's fitness center.



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Airmen from the 86th Aircraft Maintenance Squadron practice sit-ups for an upcoming physical fitness practice test Monday during unit PT at Ramstein's fitness center.

possible elimination of mandatory PT. Some welcome the relaxed standards, while others worry that losing workout time during duty hours will make it tougher to pass the more stringent PT test.

Under current fitness guidance, squadron commanders must implement and maintain a unit or squadron PT program while also ensuring that all members are permitted up to 90 minutes of duty time for physical training three times a week.

The other services have similar guidelines. The Navy doesn't mandate unit PT, but recommends that commanders give sailors at least three 60-minute workout sessions during duty hours each week, Navy spokeswoman Katie Suich said in an e-mail to Stars and Stripes.

In the Marine Corps, commanders must ensure their troops perform at least five 30-minute "combat conditioning sessions" each week, according to a Marine Corps spokesman, 2nd Lt. Brian Villiard.

The Army carves out the most time for mandatory physical training. A commander "in general" gives 1½ hours a day for first-line supervisors to conduct physical training during duty hours each week, according to an Army spokesman, Lt. Col. Lee Packnett.

Air Force officials say eliminating mandatory PT is intended to give commanders more leeway in designing and scheduling PT programs to meet their unit's needs and mission.

"Commanders are highly encouraged to continue with the fitness program, but it's not going to be mandatory," said Maj. Richelle Dowdell, an Air Force spokeswoman at the Pentagon.

Part of the reasoning behind the shift is the acknowledgement that commanders can make airmen attend PT but they can't force someone to "put that effort

forward," Dowdell said. It's up to the individual what they get from a workout, and the Air Force thinks fitness should be the individual's responsibility, she said.

But Air Force officials won't go as far as to say the expected change will shift accountability for their airmen's test scores away from commanders.

Last year's audit found that commanders did not consistently allow individual physical fitness activity during duty hours, and that unit-based fitness programs did not effectively influence airmen to make fitness a year-round commitment.

Air Force officials at the Pentagon could not answer how commanders will be held accountable under the proposed guidelines but at least one wing commander has said he doesn't expect unit PT to disappear.

"What leadership doesn't want to happen is for people to make excuses for failing the PT test and say, 'My boss didn't let me have mandatory PT time,' " Col. Giovanni Tuck, the 15th Airlift Wing commander at Hickam Air Force Base, Hawaii, said in a recent Air Force news release.

Tuck said he planned to let each unit determine "what is necessary to accomplish the mission," as it relates to physical training.

An 86th Airlift Wing spokesman said squadron commanders at Ramstein Air Base in Germany declined to be interviewed about their views on mandatory PT.

"They're not willing to speculate on any changes," since the new instruction hasn't been approved, Aaron Schoenfeld said Thursday.

Most of Ramstein's larger squadrons, however, give their airmen time during the duty day to work out. One exception is the 86th Security Forces Squadron, whose members are instructed to work out prior to or after their

shift. Only 1 percent of its airmen are on a remedial fitness plan, less than other squadrons with mandatory, duty-day PT, according to data provided by the wing.

Among some Ramstein airmen, the possible move away from mandatory PT is viewed with mixed opinions.

"I think if the standards are going to be tougher, there should be more time to do PT," said Staff Sgt. Marc Taggart, 27, an 86th Aircraft Maintenance Squadron avionics specialist from Tucson, Ariz.

Airman 1st Class Michael Yee, 23, a C-130 crew chief, thinks the Air Force should still give airmen time during the duty day to work out, but it should be a balance of unit PT and individual exercise.

"You should be fit all year round, I do agree with that," he said. But the one-workout-fits-all group mentality of unit PT isn't always beneficial for airmen, he said.

The tougher proposed standards include testing airmen twice a year — instead of once — and giving commanders the authority to boot an airman from the service for two consecutive PT test failures. Right now, a discharge isn't considered until an airman has four PT failures in a year.

"I think that is a pretty significant impact," said Maj. Alex Garcia, U.S. Air Forces in Europe fitness program consultant. "I think in the past folks thought if I fail a couple of times then I would get serious."

Some trials of the new standards at Air Force bases have indicated the failure rate could skyrocket.

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