

Get the **facts** on fitness myths

If you've spent countless hours working out, and are yet to see results, then you've most likely fallen prey to the most common fitness and exercise myths. Here's some help from a certified personal trainer.

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MYTH #1: CRUNCHES WILL GET RID OF BELLY FAT

Performing 10, 20, or even a thousand crunches a day will not get rid of your belly fat. Unfortunately, the concept of spot reduction is simply a myth, and applies to all trouble spots of the body. If this theory were true, then tennis players would have one arm significantly skinnier than the other. When the body expends enough calories, fat will be reduced from the entire body, including the target area. This is probably why most people believe that spot reduction is possible. It also seems that the first areas of the body to gain weight are generally the last places to lose it. Most of us have a six-pack waiting to be unveiled; however it is hidden underneath a layer of fat. So the key to a flat, sexy stomach is to lose overall body fat by incorporating proper nutrition, resistance training, and moderate aerobic exercise.

MYTH #2: TO GET A FLAT STOMACH, I NEED TO DO A HIGH NUMBER OF AB EXERCISES DAILY

The abdominal muscles should be treated like any other muscle of the body, which means you shouldn't train your abs everyday. A rest period between workouts is essential for muscle recovery; preferably on an every-other-day basis. Performing three sets of 20 to 25 repetitions of various abdominal exercises should be sufficient to provide a training effect. If you find yourself needing to perform more repetitions to feel a burn, then you are most likely performing the exercise with improper form, or too quickly. To increase the intensity, slow down the range of motion, add a weighted plate to your chest for resistance, or perform the exercise on an incline.

MYTH #3: REVERSE CRUNCHES & LEG LIFTS WILL TARGET MY LOWER ABDOMINALS

This is a common misconception among fitness enthusiasts. Lower abs and upper abs are in fact the same muscle, and cannot be differentiated. Based on electro-myographic (EMG) activity recordings, people performing crunches, reverse crunches, or leg lifts are unable to trigger a contraction in one specific area. The confusion is probably based on the fact that performing leg lifts or reverse crunches fatigues the lower part of the abdominals. This muscle fatigue is actually due to the hip flexor muscle, iliopsoas, which lies deep below the abdominals. Adding a variety of abdominal exercises to your routine is acceptable, just keep in mind that differentiating between your upper and lower abs is not possible.

MYTH #4: MUSCLE TURNS INTO FAT IF I STOP EXERCISING

Muscle is a metabolically active tissue, and fat is an organic tissue; two completely different types of tissues with their own roles and functions. One cannot turn into the other, even if exercise is discontinued. The fact that most people begin to resemble the Pillsbury Doughboy soon after program discontinuation, is due to muscle loss and eating habits. When training is decreased or stopped altogether, the number of calories you ingest must also be reduced. Otherwise, the extra calories that were being utilised during your workouts will get stored as fat. In the absence of a strength stimulus, the muscles atrophy, which means they become smaller and weaker. This in turn decreases the metabolic rate and promotes further fat storage. Fortunately, one or two brief workouts per week are sufficient to maintain strength levels for extended periods of time.

MYTH #5: I WILL GET BULKY IF I LIFT WEIGHTS

Most women are concerned about lifting weights in fear of developing muscles of Herculean proportion. Fortunately, women do not have enough testosterone to make significant increases in muscle size. In order for a woman to achieve the muscle gains seen in bodybuilding magazines, supplements and ergogenic aids are needed. However, strength training does play a critical part in the overall wellbeing of the human body, and should be incorporated into your fitness programme. Aside from the physical aspect of looking toned and lean, it also increases bone density, which helps prevent diseases like osteoporosis in the later years.

MYTH #6: THE BEST TIME TO EXERCISE IS IN THE AFTERNOON

Many studies have been conducted, and there is no evidence to support this theory. The assumption comes from the fact that more fatal heart attacks occur between 6am and noon. This is due to the fact that the blood platelets are more prone to forming blood clots in the morning, not because individuals exercise in the morning. In fact, regular exercise has been proven to reduce the risk of heart attacks at any time of the day. The relationship between getting the best results and the best time of day to exercise simply does not exist. If you exercise at a certain intensity level, you'll burn the same amount of calories regardless of when you exercise. The key to getting results is to be consistent, so whatever time suits your schedule is the best time to exercise.

MYTH #7: LOW-INTENSITY EXERCISE BURNS MORE FAT THAN HIGH-INTENSITY EXERCISE

This theory is based on the fact that when you exercise at a low-intensity, 60 per cent of the calories you burn come from fat, whereas only 35 per cent of calories from fat are burned during high-intensity exercise. Although it may seem that low-intensity exercise has the ability to burn more fat, the maths proves otherwise.

For example, if you perform a low-intensity aerobic workout for 30 minutes at about 50 per cent of your exercise capacity, you will spend approximately 200 calories (120 of those calories come from fat). If you perform the same workout at about 75 per cent of your exercise capacity, you will burn approximately 400 calories (140 of those calories come from fat). Even though the lower-intensity exercise burns a greater percentage of fat, the final computations show that higher-intensity exercises burn more calories and more calories from fat in the same amount of time.

The point here is that both low- and high-intensity exercises have their own benefits, and they both promote fat loss. However, if you are more comfortable performing lower-intensity exercises, simply increase the duration of the activity. Remember, the concept of a 'fat-burning zone' is simply a myth.

MYTH #8: I CAN EAT ANYTHING I WANT IF I EXERCISE

Proper nutrition is just as important as regular physical exercise in order to achieve a well-balanced lifestyle. Even though you train regularly, a change in eating habits is a must if you want to improve your overall health or lose the extra weight. Also, exercise expends energy which comes from the foods that you eat. If your body is not properly fuelled, it can break down precious muscle tissue to be used as energy, and in turn will slow down your metabolism.

MYTH #9: EATING MORE PROTEIN WILL BUILD BIGGER MUSCLES

Protein is an essential nutrient that is responsible for building and repairing body tissue, and cannot be stored by the body for future use. Ingesting protein without performing strength exercises will not add an ounce to your muscle mass. Therefore, a large consumption of protein beyond the body's requirements will only convert the excess into body fat. Also, you run the risk of placing strain on your kidneys and becoming dehydrated. As a general rule of thumb, the average individual

who exercises regularly needs between 1 and 1.2 grams of protein per pound of lean bodyweight for necessary muscle growth. Your lean bodyweight can be determined with the help of a qualified trainer by assessing your body composition with the use of a fat-caliper or a bioelectrical impedance device.

MYTH #10: I'M PREGNANT - I CAN'T EXERCISE

Pregnancy should not deter a woman from exercising. In the past, women were discouraged from performing physical activity in fear of harming the baby. Today, numerous studies have proven that regular exercise during pregnancy offers many benefits, such as fewer pre-natal discomforts, increased energy, improved posture, reduced mood swings, less problematic deliveries, and an ability to maintain or even increase their cardiovascular fitness, muscular strength, and flexibility. The American College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists concluded that exercise during pregnancy is safe for most women, and is based on the recommendation that participants be carefully monitored by their physician.

MYTH #11: STRENGTH TRAINING WILL STUNT A CHILD'S GROWTH

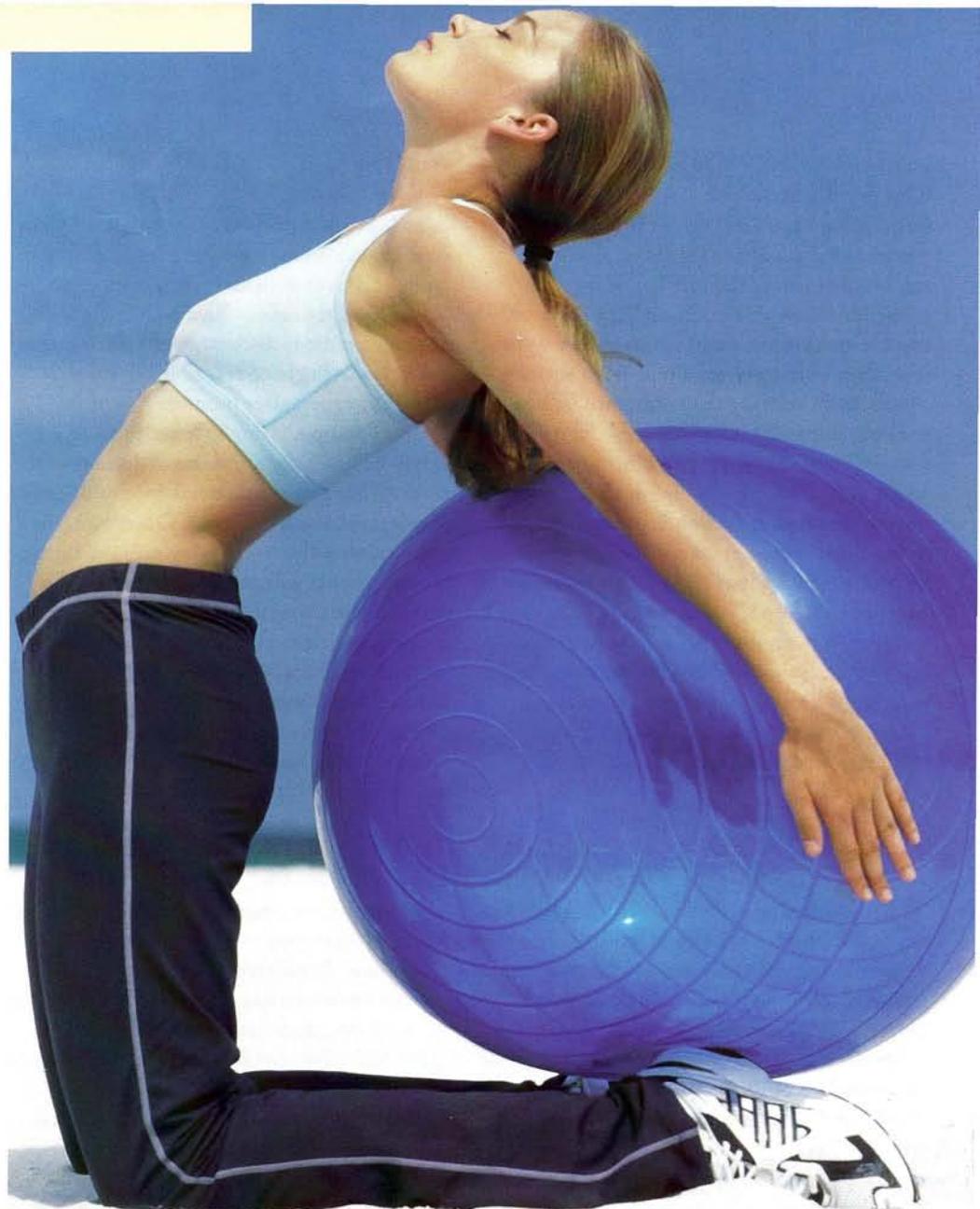
Based on current scientific research, strength training will not inhibit a child's growth under normal circumstances. In fact, moderate strength training can reduce their risk of sports-related injuries, and boost their self-confidence because of the increase in strength. Strength training can be safe, effective, and fun for children of all ages, provided they are properly supervised at all times, and use the minimum level of resistance to produce a training effect.

MYTH #12: SWEATING IS A SIGN THAT I'M BURNING CALORIES

Sweating is a defence mechanism to cool the body down when its core temperature becomes elevated due to the environment or when you exercise. It is a sign that you are losing fluid, and not a sign that you are burning calories. The fluids lost through evaporation must be replaced by drinking water. The colour of your urine can be used as a gauge of your hydration level; the lighter the colour the better.

MYTH #13: MUSCLE WEIGHS MORE THAN FAT

Have you ever been asked the trivia question "what weighs more; a pound of bricks or a pound of feathers"? A pound is a pound, regardless of the item. This misconception that muscle weighs more than fat is probably due to



the fact that most people notice an increase in body weight when they begin a strength training programme. Muscle does not weigh more than fat. It is denser and occupies less space than fat. Therefore, in one cubic inch, there will be a lot more muscle tissue, and hence will weigh more than one cubic inch of fat.

MYTH #14: STRETCHING ISN'T NECESSARY

The fitness component that is most often neglected or misused is flexibility. Stretching is essential, and should be incorporated at the beginning and at the end of every training session. The more obvious reasons to stretch are to increase the range of motion at the joint and muscle, and to also prevent injuries. Furthermore, stretching can reduce the severity of DOMS (Delayed Onset Muscle Soreness), which is usually felt 24 to 48 hours after intense training. Ideally, stretches should be done daily, and should be held still for 15 to 30 seconds.

MYTH #15: NO PAIN, NO GAIN

While exercise may leave you feeling a little sore the next day, it should not be a torturous activity that causes severe pain. The pain that is felt after training is caused by tiny tears in the muscle fibres. If soreness is felt for more than three days after your workout, it is an indication that you overexerted yourself. Also, if you are feeling sore after every workout, then you must allow your body more time to recover. As a general rule, allow at least one day of rest and recovery between sessions before training the same muscle group again. Finally, an adequate warm-up, cool-down, and static stretches should be performed to reduce and prevent muscle soreness.

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