

Declaring a truce with weight loss

A new approach to exercise and shedding those pounds

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THE IDEA OF WEIGHT loss seems to conjure up images of myriad fad diets and philosophies—cut out the carbs, go low fat, eat all the protein you want, or eat foods with a low glycemic index, whatever that means. If exercise is ever mentioned in the plan, it is usually described as a calorie-burning tool. The epic wars

that take place in the battle to burn off excess calories through exercise are, like most wars, destructive, unnecessary, and fraught with propaganda. Unfortunately, the weight-conscious public tends to believe that the way to lose weight is to restrict caloric intake and/or burn it off through exercise. This has led to time and effort wasted as we weigh food, restrict portions, and fill our cupboards with “low cal” products.

Exercise, that blessed relief from the sedentary epidemic, has been reduced to a necessary evil, per-formed grudgingly as we painfully watch the calorie stats mount.

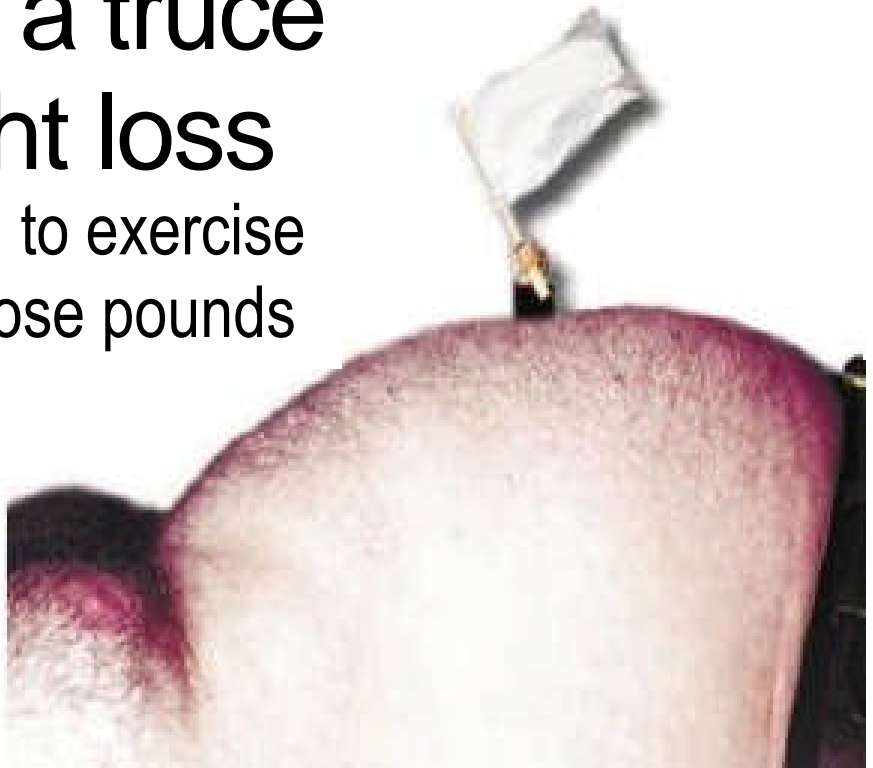
If we stop to examine the calorie counting strategy, it becomes obvious that the battle is lost from the start. It takes about 12 hours of walking to burn just one pound of fat. To actually maintain a negative calorie balance takes heroic dedication and effort. Most of us may be able to maintain this attrition for a short period, but when you resume regular exercise and eating after one of these bouts of insanity, your body will stock up on extra fat to prepare for the next round. Small wonder most people end up heavier after a temporary attempt at dieting and excessive exercise. The body is retaliating against aggressive dieting and exercise strategies.

Paradoxically, winning the fat war means forgetting there is a war at all.

The best fat management lies in a more balanced approach to exercise. It can create a body that evolves as a partner in the weight-loss process, rather than an enemy to despise and deprive.

It is important to realize that your body has a particular weight it tries to maintain, like a thermostat seeking a constant temperature. The set point of the “fat thermostat” can be moved up or down according to multiple factors. In particular, the fat thermostat's set point is influenced by genetics, sleep debt, biological rhythms, meal patterns, food choices (not just caloric intake), stress levels (emotional and physical), and exercise. By lowering your fat thermostat's set point, your body can become effective at controlling its weight for the rest of your life.

Appropriate exercise is one of the primary sources of information to the fat thermostat for lowering the set point and it uses two strategies. First, it will increase the resting metabolic rate, which means that you will burn more calories when you're not active. Second, specific exercise will decrease appetite. This sounds counter intuitive, but it's important to get the appropriate amount and type of exercise. The old cliché “more is better” doesn't apply here. Inappropriate or excessive exercise can increase the fat thermostat's set point. And, that set point will be raised even more if caloric restriction is added to the equation.



With regular and appropriate exercise, your fat thermostat gets the idea that carrying around all this weight is unnecessary and maybe some should be shed. The fat thermostat won't just start dropping the set point with the first signs of exercise; it needs to know you're serious, so be patient and keep going. This is a life-time habit that can be maintained. On average, you can expect to lose 1.5 to 5.5 ounces of fat per week. This doesn't seem like much, but it can continue for years and will control your weight as long as regular, appropriate exercise continues. Before you conclude you have to spend the rest of your life on a treadmill, however, read on. You may be surprised at how easy it is.

There are three important factors in using exercise for weight loss: How intensely you should exercise, how long, and how often.

Intensity

Exercise can be divided into low-, medium- and high-intensity exercise. Low-intensity exercise includes walking, yoga, Pilates, easy biking and so on. The threshold between low- and medium-intensity depends on whether your body can deliver enough oxygen to your muscles to meet demand.

You can test for this so-called aerobic threshold by using the “10-second breath” as a general guide. Breathe in for five seconds and out for five seconds through your nose. The breath should be continuous; don't hold it at the end of inhalation or exhalation. You don't have to breathe this way while you are exercising, but try it every once in a while. If you can't maintain this breathing pattern, then you have probably passed from low-intensity exercise to medium-intensity. The level of intensity at which this occurs is different for each person depending on health and fitness. The level increases as you exercise more regularly at low-intensity.

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Medium-intensity exercise includes anything that gets you breathing hard, including aerobics, jogging/running, spinning and so on. These types of exercises are good for cardiovascular conditioning, improving performance and other health benefits, but will not convince the fat thermo-stat to lower its set point. Conversely, medium-intensity exercise will convince the fat thermostat to increase the set point and try to store more fat.

High-intensity exercise includes weight training and short bursts of near-maximum intensity, such as short sprints. This type of exercise increases muscle mass, which helps to increase your metabolic rate when at rest. The ideal combination of exercise for weight loss includes low-intensity and high-intensity exercise.

Duration

The best benefits for weight loss from low-intensity exercise occur if it's performed at least an hour a day, but it doesn't have to be continuous. Exercise can occur in shorter spurts, as long as they add up to an hour. So take the stairs, walk to the store, or get off the bus a few stops early—incorporate exercise into your daily routine.

For high-intensity exercise, one repetition per set is all that is necessary to see gains in muscle strength if the set is done to fatigue. So, weight workouts don't have to consume large portions of your leisure time. Each set should include eight to 12 repetitions with the last repetition achieving total fatigue. Consult a personal trainer to get set up with a strength program that is best suited to your goals and to ensure you're lifting safely. It's well worth the investment if you are going to make exercise a part of your daily life.

Frequency

Low-intensity exercise should be performed five to six days per week. High-intensity exercise should be performed a minimum of once per week for each major muscle group, with a minimum of 48 hours rest in between. Try to separate the time between high- and low-intensity workouts because the cumulative effect can be counter-productive.

The all too familiar stereotype of someone leaning on their calorie-burning machine, concentrating solely on the calorie tally, should be erased from the picture of what exercise should be. Focus instead on truly understanding how your body works to enjoy a healthy relationship with it for life. Put down your weapons, take a walk, savour yoga, and enjoy what your body can do.

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