

# EXERCISE MYTHS:

## CHANGING YOUR MIND ABOUT CHANGING YOUR BODY

By Dr. Geoff Outerbridge, M.Sc., D.C.

**O**UTDOOR enthusiasts living in Ottawa are twice blessed—they're doing something they love and they enjoy the health benefits that flow from physical activity.

Many people don't understand, however, the complex relationship between exercise and their body. A surprisingly large percentage of outdoor enthusiasts still compromise their fitness by clinging to health myths.

We've all heard these common complaints: "I work on my abs all the time and I still have this gut," or "I'm too old to start exercising," or "Playing tennis hurt my shoulder, so I packed it in."

Not only do such myths make it difficult to maximize the health benefits of your favourite activities, they prevent people from engaging in the activities they love. By understanding a few key concepts about how exercise affects your body, you can avoid these common misconceptions.

Here's the basic concept to dispel most exercise myths: When your body is exposed to a physical stress, it slowly adapts so the next time it encounters the same stress, it's better suited to deal with it.

We all understand that muscles will get bigger if we make them lift heavy loads. Our body will also adapt to physical stresses by increasing the density and diameter of bone, creating molecules that burn fat and

carbohydrates or make proteins, increasing the number of blood vessels to tissues, and so on. In order to build these molecules and tissues, the body needs the basic building blocks such as vitamins, minerals, carbohydrates, fats and proteins.

The adaptations the body generates are specific to the demands. If your exercise routine involves lifting heavy weights, your body will adapt for weight-lifting, but it won't be ready to run a marathon.

Your physical demands must be within your body's capacity to adapt and it has to have sufficient time to recover. If the demands are excessive, tissues will become damaged. This damage and subsequent repair is often sub-clinical (you don't feel it) and bits of fibrous tissue will be left behind. These bits of tissue can accumulate over time, perhaps years, and eventually cause pain. The discomfort may be sudden, but the problem was probably building for a long time.

Let's examine some common exercise fallacies:

### 1. I CAN USE THE SAME EXERCISE ROUTINE FOR MONTHS.

Exercise stimulates physical adaptation. Once you've adapted to an exercise routine, your body stops adapting unless the activity changes. Vary your routine by changing the exercises, intensity, frequency or duration of activities. There are a lot of variations and if you need help,

consult a personal trainer. It's worth the investment if you are going to spend all that time working out.

### 2. NOW THAT I'M EXERCISING, IT DOESN'T MATTER WHAT I EAT.

It is more important to eat properly when you begin an exercise program, as your body needs proper building blocks to re-model and create tissues.

### 3. IF A WOMAN LIFTS WEIGHTS, SHE WILL GET "BULKY."

The hormone testosterone helps stimulate the production of new muscle tissue and determines how large your muscles will become. Women have a lower testosterone level than men, so their muscles will not enlarge as much.

### 4. EATING MORE PROTEIN WILL CAUSE NEW MUSCLE GROWTH.

Muscles are mainly made up of protein, but eating protein is not a stimulus to build more muscle. To stimulate muscle growth, the muscle must do work. Without the demands of physical exercise, the body has no reason to build more muscle.

### 5. WORKING THE ABDOMINALS WILL GIVE ME A FLAT BELLY.

Many people believe it's possible to "spot reduce" fat by exercising specific parts of the body. Many exercise machines advertised on TV exploit this myth. In fact, fat is lost evenly from all parts of the body. So, getting



rid of fat on the belly requires an exercise routine that burns fat. Generally, this should include low intensity aerobic exercises and higher intensity strength exercises.

**6. IF IT HURTS, STOP DOING IT.**

Although this may be true in the short term, many people never return to the activity they have enjoyed for years. Without consulting a health care professional, many assume that the pain will never go away (or they're just getting old) and they quit. More reasonably, why not get it fixed and get back to the activity you love? Most pain is due to accumulated, repeated and painless mini-traumas. These aches and pains can be remedied reasonably quickly by massage therapists, chiropractors, physiotherapists, and athletic therapists who treat soft tissue (muscles, fascia, tendons and ligaments). Soft tissue therapists can get you back in the game.

**7. I'M TOO OLD TO START WORKING OUT.**

Exercise improves physical strength, stamina, mental health and well-being. Many individuals begin exercise programs later in life—even after age 85! They find dramatic improvements in strength, coordination, balance, energy, and mental acuity. It's never too late to begin an exercise program and it needn't require a lot of time or effort. You can start at any level, and any increase in activity will help. If you're currently inactive or approaching middle age, start with a visit to your doctor. Seniors can get started by contacting a personal trainer who has experience with elderly clients.

There are no limits to what you can change about your body with exercise—only misconceptions about how to do it. Change your mind about changing your body, and you'll be amazed at what you can accomplish.

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