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IS CARDIO DEAD?

CONSIDERING HOW QUICKLY STRENGTH TRAINING LEADS TO FAT LOSS, WEIGHTS MIGHT WIPE OUT AEROBICS FOR GOOD. AIDA LEISENRING INVESTIGATES. PHOTOGRAPH BY ALBERT GIORDAN

Experts have been hammering home the importance of weight lifting since the creation of the first dumbbell, but for years women resisted the idea for fear of going from lithe to lumberjack. That was then. Turns out, people like lifting. Female use of free weights has leaped by 126 percent since 1990, according to the Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association. But now the trendy are abandoning cardio completely in favor of pure weight workouts and the promise of a lean, fat-free physique in less time. After decades of "feeling the burn," it may be time to step off the Step.

VIVE LA RESISTANCE

Many experts agree that for overall calorie expenditure, strength training leaves cardio in the dust. According to exercise physiologist Wayne Westcott, PhD, the director of research at the South Shore YMCA in Quincy, Massachusetts, workouts with weights consume eight to 10 calories a minute compared with cardio's 10 to 12, but after a weight-lifting session, exercisers burn an additional 25 percent of the previous workout's total as the body shifts from anaerobic to aerobic mode (its normal state). What's more, increasing lean muscle raises your resting metabolic rate, which also leads to more calorie burning. "For every three pounds of muscle, which most people gain in three months of training, you expend 120 extra calories a day just sitting around," Westcott says.

Even cardio's other claim to fame—that it keeps your heart healthy—is being horned in on by muscle-building workouts. University studies in the U.S. show that resistance training might lower resting blood pressure and diabetes risk and reduce levels of "bad" cholesterol while increasing the "good" kind. The biggest surprise for aerobicizers may be that, according to cardiologist Mark Nachamie, MD, an instructor in clinical medicine at New York University School of Medicine, "75 percent of the effects of aerobic activity aren't on the heart and lungs—they're on the muscles. If you train with light weights, you can get the same benefits as from an aerobic activity. But you need to be able to work for 10 or 20 minutes continuously," he says, so the emphasis should be on *light*. "Most people lift heavier weights, enough to cause total fatigue after five to eight reps, because they want to tone and build muscle, but that extra effort means they have to stop frequently to catch their breath. That's not an aerobic workout." Westcott adds, "Lightweight resistance training still has to be done three times a week for 20 minutes to meet the American College of Sports Medicine's guidelines for cardiovascular exercise." And you'll need to tack on extra sessions with heavier weights a couple of days a week to add metabolism-boosting lean-muscle mass.

SLOW DOWN

But why go to the gym three days a week when you could go just once? In his book *Power of 10* (HarperCollins), Adam Zickerman, the owner of Manhattan's InForm Fitness Studio, argues that 30 minutes a week of slow-motion weight training (trademarked as SuperSlow) burns more calories than regular-pace lifting and is enough to get—and stay—in shape. "If you do sit-ups quickly, you're working off momentum, but if you do them incredibly slowly, you'll use nearly 100 percent of your abdominal muscle fibers," Zickerman says. And working more muscle means burning more calories. The method has its devotees, from the New York City model who traded in her two-hour, five-day-a-week gym routine for 20 minutes weekly at InForm to the Tyler, Texas, neurosurgeon who drives four hours round trip to Freeport, Louisiana, for his once-a-week, 30-minute session with a SuperSlow trainer.

But not all weights-only-workout experts are on the slow-moving bandwagon. "Muscles begin to atrophy within 48 hours," says Chicago trainer Jim Karas, the author of *Flip the Switch* (Harmony Books). "So if someone exercises for only 20 minutes once a week, she's not getting enough stimulus for the muscles. You need at least two weekly sessions." Scientific support is mixed. While one study, authored by Westcott and published in the *Journal of Sports Medicine and Physical Fitness*, showed that slow lifters had a 50 percent greater increase in strength after a 10-week program than those working at a regular pace, studies published in the *Journal of Strength and Conditioning Research* show that the energy expenditure, as well as the strength increase, from traditional resistance training may outstrip that of its slower sibling. (It's worth noting that participants in two of the studies lifted, fast or slowly, two to three times a week.) Slow training may be good for those plagued by pain, however. "Going slowly eliminates most of the acceleration and suddenness with which you start, stop, and change direction that are the origin of most injury," says Ken Hutchins, the Florida-based father of the SuperSlow movement. "It also allows you to concentrate on form and movement."

THE GREAT DEBATE

If strength training is the best way to reduce body fat, does this mean the end of cardio? Could be. But plateauing can occur whether your workout is running or lifting, so it's important to challenge your body by varying your routine. And without changing your food intake, lifting until your muscles gasp with fatigue won't turn a porker into a pageant queen. "People shouldn't go into strength training thinking they're going to get smaller right away," Zickerman says. "You have to alter your eating patterns." (In general, the fastest way to see a change in the fit of your clothes is to consume fewer calories than you burn daily.) Muscle is denser than fat, however, so your weight may not change, but you will appear leaner. "If you're truly time-pressed, you'll get the most bang for your buck with weights," Nachamie says. "They're the most efficient." You may also draw inspiration by looking at those who have hopped off the cardio treadmill. Says Karas of his client, newscaster Diane Sawyer: "She's 57 years old, and she's never looked better. And she mainly does weight training." □