

Exercise Makes You Fat

By Pete Cerqua

"The more I did, the fatter I got," the woman spat in disgust, sounding indignant and betrayed, as though she had just been informed that the Rolex she bought on Canal Street was a knock-off. She seemed to realize she was talking too loud and suddenly broke off, eyes darting briefly left and right. A quick sip of wine dropped her voice an octave.

"I mean, I started with just twice a week. Low weights, a zillion reps, one set after another. That is what everyone told me, you know? You want to get toned, do a lot of reps with not much weight. You want to get big, use heavy weights and do fewer reps. Well, I certainly did not want to get big, so I did the light weight thing twice a week and ran a couple of miles on two other days, but I did not seem to be getting anywhere."

It was hard to see why she was complaining. She was maybe 5'2", 115 pounds and 30 years young. She was nicely put together.

"I figured I was not working hard enough," she went on, "so I doubled the workouts. This guy I knew at the gym told me to do a split routine, upper body on Monday and Thursday, lower body on Tuesday and Friday. I even stepped-up the reps. I do not remember how many, just that it seemed like forever. Plus, I started running three miles every Wednesday. I figure I know myself pretty well. I was sure I would never keep this up without some specific goal, so I decided to compete in the Marathon, which meant I had to train for longer distances. That became my Saturday morning routine. Five miles at first, but I gradually worked up to 18."

I made my way a little closer to her. It was a small party. There were a couple dozen people milling around in the usual shifting clusters.

"What do you do for a living?" I asked her.

"I am a lawyer," she said. "Why?"

A touch of belligerence in her tone, as though she had heard one too many lawyer jokes at gatherings like these.

"Because," I said, "it sounds more like a program for a Navy Seal." That seemed to mollify her. "Did you make it?" I asked.

"The Marathon? Oh yeah. Four hours, twenty minutes. Not bad, huh? I weighed 115 pounds when I started with this routine, and 140 on the day of the race. The worst of it was I even looked softer, despite all that effort."

"The same thing happened to me." The new arrival was a woman around the same age, but bigger. She was 5'10" and she weighed 155 pounds, actually a good weight for her frame. "I was swimming twice a day for about four hours and doing the weights three times a week at home. Plus, I did extras on the weekends. I put on 30 pounds! I looked like a sumo wrestler. It was disgusting!" She took a sip of wine. "How did you lose it back?" She asked the first woman.

"I just stopped." She chuckled. "I lost 25 pounds by sitting on my butt."

"It was not that drastic for me," said the swimmer. "I cut the swimming back to twice a week and added some aerobics, but I did stop the weights. I took off 30 pounds."

When the two women found out I was a personal trainer, they glared at me as though I were a telemarketer trying to sell them aluminum siding at three o'clock in the morning.

"You are lucky you are only thirty years old," I told the lawyer. "Another ten years and you would not have managed to shed the weight with that butt-sitting approach. You probably would have shifted from exercise mania to yo-yo dieting and wound up with 40 percent body-fat."

The horrifying image brought the sudden silence I wanted, so I dropped a question into the lull: what had started her on this path in the first place? The demands of her job, she said, were having negative effects on her body. Her stress levels were driving her to nervous eating, and long hours of physical inactivity made her feel soft and saggy. She decided that draconian measures were called for. She was sure she had done everything she was supposed to do. "I just had no idea that exercise makes you fat," she concluded, hurling the phrase like a poisoned spear.

She seemed surprised that I was not surprised. She asked me whether I had seen this before. "Again and again," I told her. She had made one big mistake and one small one.

The big one? Far from reducing the stress in her life, her exercise program had become another source of tension. A six-day-a-week schedule totaling at least 12 hours would be hard enough for a retiree to maintain, let alone someone with a demanding job. Keep to it and you burn out; let it slide and you start punishing yourself for your alleged dereliction. Either way, it is self-defeating. Besides which, it makes you hungry.

"You are right about that," she said. "I was constantly ravenous."

Of course she was. Heightened stress levels combined with hours of exercise will make you crave food even more than sleep. So you eat. Then you feel bad about it, so you go for a run. Maybe you go for an extra run, but you are starving after all that running. You eat again, because you figure you have burned-off the extra calories in advance, except you have not. The truth is your appetite is outrunning your exercise program. The whole time you are pounding the pavement you are actually playing catch-up with your calorie intake, and you are dropping further and further behind.

What you need is balance. One brief strength-training workout a week can add just enough muscle tissue to your frame to require a few extra calories a day and just enough hardness to improve your muscle tone. Increased strength and a lowered percentage of body fat. That is the key to staying lean and firm. Add a dash of walking every day, a yoga class or some other stress-reducing activity once a week, and a sensible eating plan. Then you have a recipe that works in the long run.

"So what was my small mistake?" she asked.

I had to admit that "small" might not be exactly the right word. Let us call it "specific" instead. "Pardon my French," I said, "but you screwed up the strength training."

She seemed irate, but the sad truth is, she had bought into the mother of destructive exercise myths: the idea that high-volume, low-weight strength training makes you lean and toned. Exactly how and why this weed of a notion took root, sprouted and eventually engulfed the fitness garden is somewhat of a mystery, but if there is one thing I have learned in more than twenty years of training thousands of people, it is that high-volume weight training can have two and only two outcomes: If the weights are too small, it does nothing at all; if they are heavy enough to do anything, they are going to make you big. You are either wasting your time or putting on bulk. No third option is possible.

If what you want is strength, tone and lack of bulk, then you have to work harder, but you can work shorter and less often. You have to avoid that thing that bodybuilders seek—the pump—while challenging your muscles in a way that light weights cannot. How much shorter and less often? For most people, just 20 minutes once a week. Twice a week tops.

I know, it does not seem possible, but it is. Though the explanation sounds paradoxical, it makes sense once you think it through. The heart of it is that we get more done in less time by moving slowly. So slowly that it takes a full 30 seconds to do just one repetition. That makes the workout a lot harder, as you will see if you try picking up an everyday item, say a loaded briefcase, that slowly. Next, we do only one set of each exercise, and that set is limited to 90 seconds. In other words, 3 slow repetitions. Finally, we let the stopwatch rule the workout. Which is why we call this system ChronoDynaMetrics™, or timed strength measurement.

The key here is efficiency. At the speed most people train, a set of 10 reps will take about 15 seconds. A traditional workout will call for doing 12 different exercises, 3 sets of 10 reps each. That is 36 sets in all. Between each set is a rest period, usually of about 2 minutes, and each exercise requires some set-up time. The result is that you have to allocate about 2 and a-half minutes for each set. Do the math, and you will find that 36 sets will take about 90 minutes (36×2.5). But your muscles will actually be working for only 540 seconds (36×15).

One of my beginning clients, in contrast, will do a workout consisting of 6 exercises, one set per exercise, each set consisting of only 3 repetitions, but lasting 90 seconds. Even if we allow 2 minutes between exercises, the workout will be done in 19 minutes ($3.5 \times 5 + 1.5$). But the time the muscles are actually working will be the same as a 90-minute workout: 540 seconds (6×90).

The bottom line: hard work, short duration; increased strength, decreased volume; harder muscles, no increase in bulk. It is exercise, it is good for you and it will never make you fat.