

## What Type of Exercise is Best For Me?

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Ever heard that 'X is the best form of exercise'? Live in the real world and it's very likely you have. Whether the source is media drivel, a 'helpful' friend, or a news feature, we are forever being told that some dietary choices are 'superfoods', that a certain type of golf clubhead is 'the best ever', and that a favourite endeavour is 'the best exercise'. For what exactly?

Obviously not all exercises suit all individuals, either because their personal circumstances mean that it is not possible, but more often because their aims are totally incongruent to the work involved. But, despite obvious differences in lifting houses in the free weights room or pounding the treadmill, poor choices continue to be made in every gym when an individual decides to embark on a new exercise regime.

Perhaps the biggest confusion arises from the promotion of 'calories in, calories out'. Newspaper articles by nutritionists who should know better tell us that there is 400 calories in this sandwich and that this requires the best part of an hour's running to 'burn off'. This totally ignores the composition of the sandwich (almost never do you hear about the phytate content of wheat) and the actual effects of the body during exertion. Most of all, this confuses the aims of real people. To date, not a single client has ever asked for my help in burning up energy (eg. calories) – just fat.

Different exercises will use up different fuel. Different intensities will affect this fuel usage too, and in no areas is this more applicable to than in cardio-vascular exercise. Be it running, rowing, cycling, it is rarely a case of what you put in is what you get out.

The most popular aim in any gym is fat loss. Outside of the gym, these people will need to ensure that their food intake is constructed in a way that promotes fat loss (not restricting calorific intake) and then, when in the gym, work in a way that burns fat. This does not mean jumping onto the treadmill and selecting 'fat burn' – the figures used for these settings are another example of mythical fitness and, if they worked, no-one would be reading this article.

To burn fat efficiently, it is important to understand how your body chooses fuel; this fuel for living and exercise comes mainly from fat and carbohydrates. The preferred fuel of skeletal muscle is carbohydrates – this means that if you have carbohydrates available, your body will use them as the primary fuel source (not fat). The only way you can access fat is to drain the carbohydrates through intense work (eg. resistance or hard CV) and then work at a level that fat can supply energy for. Fat, as a slow-release fuel, can only sustain you properly at low intensities. For almost everyone, this is powerwalking, or the equivalent activity that continually uses energy without forcing your body to reach for the carbohydrates. You can measure an individual's optimum fat-burning zone using a

TrainSmart monitor, and it will normally lie around 115-125bpm. In matters of CV exercise, the most reliable gauge of your intensity is always your heart rate (rather than complexity of movement, perception, etc).

You will burn a lot of fat whenever you do work after draining your stores of carbohydrates. The massive drop in insulin levels could see you increase the percentage of fuel sourced from fat from 10% to almost 80%, providing you stay at a low intensity when activating fat. You should not work hard when 'empty' of carbs – medium or high intensity will require carbs (carbs you do not have). This causes your body to supply carbohydrates to fulfil requirements, but only through breaking down your lean mass (muscle) – this is the last thing you want to do, as lean mass is the only important factor in your metabolic rate. Resistance work (weights) is therefore one of the most beneficial things an individual can do if fat loss is desired.

Resistance work is also the key to anyone looking to build muscle. The key here is understanding overload. Overload is something that occurs in muscle fibres when they are taken to or above their maximum, eg. when they are hit really hard. Anyone who regularly does weights will recognise the satisfying soreness in their muscles the next day and this is a good sign of overload (although you do not necessarily need to be mega-sore following a workout). In any case, this overload instigates the hormonal cascade that turns results in bigger, stronger muscles. What this means to anyone wanting to cause such changes (or even just improve body composition, eg. fat loss) is that you should do less sustained work, but higher intensity. This means a reasonably short but especially intense workout, reaching muscular failure between 9 and 12 reps for maximum hypertrophy/muscular response. Then just rest well and eat well – this is where all your gains will materialise.

For those looking to improve cardiovascular fitness, intensity is still important but the rules do change somewhat. This is the only area of gym work which comes close to appropriating 'the more you put in, the more you get out' catchphrase. For most gym users, a simple but demanding interval training session will be more than enough to facilitate rapid improvement in athletic capacity, and this applies whether you are rowing, running, cycling or otherwise. Again, intensity/bpm is the key. For more serious athletes, a slightly more tactical approach may be justified, taking into account the lactate threshold of the body and pushing this higher and higher through horrifically demanding but exact fitness.

Other individuals will train with performance goals in mind, and this will inevitably involve a combination of the above forms of training, depending on the individual and their aims. The extra training involved though here will take the form of sport-specific training, which is a broad label to cover any type of training that prepares the athlete for the specific demands of their competition. Examples could involve map-reading practise whilst physically exhausted to improve orienteering or one-leg squats on a bosu dome to improve neuromuscular efficiency for running. However, for most athletes, optimising the core (their mid-section) for optimum performance is what brings about the most benefits. Stability and strength, which give the core the ability to remain static in the midst of ongoing movement, are the key attributes that can be uprated through a range of movements that mimic lunge, squat or twist patterns that the athlete is likely to face.

Resistance/Weights refers to intense work against resistance provided by free

weights/gravity/machines that is measured in repetitions and sets. The purpose should always be to overload the muscle. Uses up very high levels of carbohydrates as fuel to replenish the muscle cells involved, so optimum performance (and therefore efficiency of the workout) is limited by the availability of carbohydrates. Will not directly activate fat burning to any great extent, although the rise in metabolism that accompanies the overload-and-repair process (approximately 72 hours) is very beneficial in both protecting muscle mass and increasing the rate of fat burning.

*Resistance is useful for: building muscle, losing fat, strengthening joints*

*Negatives of resistance work: not useful once low on energy, calculation of reps and sets are important.*

Cardio is any work that involved repetitive movement, such as running/cycling/rowing. Generally involves a lot of muscle and uses up a lot of energy over a sustained period of time, although these pursuits are dependant on carbohydrates as fuel, so optimum performance is again limited by the availability of carbohydrates. Low-level CV can use fat provided there is low availability of carbs.

*Intense cardio is useful for: fitness*

*Negatives of intense cardio is: can compromise lean mass if done for too long.*

*Low level cardio is best for: fat loss, provided you have used up excess carbohydrates.*

*Negatives of low level cardio is: generally considered quite boring.*

**Example A.** Training program for 30-year-old man looking to improve fitness and reduce body fat (with a view to running a half-marathon):

Monday –	Intense CV/Intervals for 30 mins, then low level CV/fat burning for 45 mins
Tuesday -	rest
Wednesday –	Full Body Resistance Workout, 13 sets, then low level CV/fat burning for 45 mins
Thursday -	rest
Friday –	10k run, taking around 55-60 mins
Saturday –	low level CV/fat-burning for 30 mins before breakfast (while 'empty' of carbs)
Sunday -	rest
Diet: High protein, medium fats, medium/low carbs.	

**Example B.** Training program for 40-year-old woman looking to reduce body fat, but without lots of time to get to the gym.

Monday –	Full Body Resistance Workout, 13 sets, then low level CV/fat burning for 60 mins.
Tuesday -	rest
Wednesday -	rest
Thursday -	Full Body Resistance Workout, 13 sets, then low level CV/fat burning for 60 mins.
Friday -	rest
Saturday –	low level CV/fat-burning for 30 mins before breakfast (while 'empty' of carbs)
Sunday –	low level CV/fat-burning for 30 mins before breakfast
Diet: Medium/High protein, medium fats, low carbs.	

In the two examples above, Example A has the increased leaning towards sport-specific training through the long run on the Saturday and a variety of exercise, but this is still a simple workout regime. Example B is more focused on one goal, that of fat loss, and uses the time available to ensure this is achieved as soon as possible.

For most people, a combination of exercise will suit and, for everyone, their nutrition will be

a major factor in the results they achieve. Because we are simply a collection of nutrients derived from what we ingest, nutrition is always king. But if all factors are working efficiently in both the kitchen and the gym, then you will find that change is both effortless (well, almost) and ongoing.

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