

Five Common Mistakes Women Make in the Gym

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As most people who visit the gym will know, attendance and results hardly go hand in hand. There are normally numerous ways to improve the efficiency of your workout, but here are five mistakes that I tend to stand out in women routines when we dissect their existine habits:

Doing aerobic exercise before weight training

About 70pc of my clients are doing both cardiovascular work followed by weights when I start seeing them. This is almost always down to a habit that has remained with them since they started using the gym, and then it was because a fitness instructor told them to do it... 'because it warms up the muscles'. It also drains them of the high-intensity fuel they require (carbohydrates) and means you no longer have the strength to cause the microtrauma required to make your session worthwhile. You need carbohydrates available to make weight training efficient. At the same time, if you want to burn fat, you need to deplete your stores of carbohydrates before your body will begin to turn to its secondary fuel source. So you need an absence of carbohydrates to make cardiovascular work efficient. Doing your CV before weights achieves neither... by swapping them around, you can achieve both.

Using ab rollers or ab machines

These machines will not help you. Leaving aside the debate over how valid abdominal flexion exercises are for a second, the ab rollers may put you in the right position so you feel the burn in your stomach, but they take away enough resistance to render the exercise aerobic. Aerobics does not strengthen or tone muscles; resistance work does, so don't make it easy for yourself! You will also find that using an ab roller take away any requirement for stabilization, so besides working hard for little pay-off you are also teaching your core muscles (trans-abs, obliques, quadratus lomborum, etc) to deactivate. You'll miss them when they're gone. The ab machines always involve bending at the hips, not the midriff - if you look down to see where your abs are situated you will see that they do not cause hip flexion. This job is performed by your hip flexors. This is why it takes so long to feel anything in your abs whilst using these machines; they are now only supporting your hip flexors. Forget about these silly machines and stick with crunches on the floor or using a swiss ball.

Using low resistance/high reps 'to avoid getting muscly'

The best example of this is normal-sized women on a leg press machine using 30kg resistance. It can also be seen in others using tiny little dumbbells to do bicep curls with. Sometimes I ask them if there is a reason behind their chosen level of resistance, and I generally receive two replies; "Thats the weight I was given on my induction," and "I dont want to get muscly". Even if the weight was a little challenging the first time you did it, you must still ensure that you continue to overload the muscles by pushing up the resistance (this is what is called Progressive Adaptation).

And to all the women who are trying to tone up without getting muscly... relax, you cannot build a man's body – you simply do not have the hormones. Men create around 7mg per day of testosterone, women just 0.3mg. If you want to improve body composition, the same principles still apply – it has to be intense. Reaching failure, or near-failure, in 9-12 reps is a good way to do this.

Using the hip abduction machines to 'tone up the legs'

The hip adduction machines are the ones that involve sitting upright and moving your knees away from another. Fitness instructors seem to love putting this on members' programs 'because it tones up the legs'. It doesn't. This movement uses only your abductors (tensor fascia lata, gluteus medius), very small muscles at the hip – not your quads or hamstring, which together give your legs their shape. To activate both of these muscle groups, you should try exercises that involve extension at the knee and hip, such as leg press or lunges.

Counting calories on the treadmill

When I ask clients what their routine has been up to that point, so often part of the routine involves running on the treadmill 'for 300 calories'. Now, calories are just a unit of energy and using them up will not necessarily improve your body composition. Training this way may even damage composition as high-calorie exercise is high-intensity exercise – this requires carbohydrates and, if they are low, the shortfall will come from protein, eg. Skeletal muscle. However, by doing your cardiovascular exercise second, and at a lower level of 117-120 bpm, you can isolate fat as your primary fuel source, whilst giving protection to your lean mass. It sounds simple, because it is!

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