

EXERCISE MYTHS

By Ann Gerhardt, MD.

Bottom Line at the Top: A recent article decimates the role of exercise in weight control. But it focuses only on very strenuous physical activity, ignoring the well-proven role of movement in weight loss and body composition. The hour a day of mild to moderate physical activity, even in 10-minute segments, recommendation of the CDC, Surgeon General and every other health-related organization still holds for improving health and contributing to optimal weight. Then sit less the other 23 hours.

John Cloud set off fireworks with his “The Myth About Exercise” article in the August 17, 2009 Time Magazine. He asserts that exercise not only doesn’t induce weight loss, but it packs on the pounds. What a jerk. A snarky twerp who **just** noticed the mounds of data comparing diet and exercise for weight loss, the data showing that weight loss requires caloric restriction, not just exercise.

He’s added his bias that exercise equals hard, sweaty, miserable work, ignoring the concept that exercise equals movement and that fidgeters generally weigh less, postal carriers are rarely obese and healthy physical activity doesn’t have to hurt. He threw in some anecdotes about his wife’s friends to ‘prove’ that fat people use exercise to justify gorging on forbidden food. Publish these biases in a prominent publication like the Times, and it gives lethargic people fatal ammunition against any reason to exercise.

“From a weight-loss perspective, you would have been better off sitting on the sofa knitting,” he opines, ignoring some of the more subtle data concerning weight loss. Data from diet programs that show that a significant amount of mild to moderate exercise is essential to maintaining lost weight. (Perhaps it works for weight maintenance because it makes people feel like they are doing something healthy, and eating reasonably well goes along with that. I can’t count the number of patients who stop controlling food intake when they stop exercise, and vice versa.)

He ignores emerging data that people who unsuccessfully try to lose weight with exercise and diet are healthier than those who don’t even try. Moderate exercise changes body composition and shape, often reducing inches, a goal of many dieters.

He also ignores the health consequences of his pronouncement, since weight loss is the primary reason for starting, but not the primary benefit resulting from an exercise program. For those who haven’t discovered the thrill of sport, the mental peace of physical activity or the health benefits of fitness, John Cloud just put the last nail in the coffin.

His alarmist revelation is not new. For years weight loss studies have found that exercise alone does not lead to weight loss. Nutritionists dispelled the no pain, no gain myth long ago. Exercise, in the absence of caloric restriction, does not melt away the pounds, especially if a hard hour at the gym is followed by a two hour nap and 4 hours in front of the TV. But replacing sitting (and eating) in front of a TV or computer with gardening, games, strolling, dancing and sex would do far more for weight control than a spin class.

Mr. Cloud's premise, that exercise makes you hungry, assumes that fat people crave burgers, fries and pastry as the reward for sweating. He argues that the un-equal caloric tit for tat drives up weight, a conclusion not verified by data. Usually the "exercise-only" group in weight loss studies experience no or only minimal weight change, up or down. These study groups, usually using moderate exercise like walking, "prove" that exercise doesn't induce weight loss OR weight gain.

People do have unrealistic ideas about the number of calories expended during exercise. People who assume that their exercise must have burned thousands of calories because they got tired and sweated a river are either misinformed or at least slightly delusional. Case in point: When I was a teen I figured that 10 sit-ups equaled a chocolate chip cookie (the goal being more cookies, not less weight).

Caloric expenditure tables and inaccurate calculations spewed out as digital fact by exercise machines don't help much. They can't possibly assess your body composition and work efficiency, both of which can drastically change the number of calories expended. An ambling 150# marshmallow woman burns far fewer calories walking 3 miles per hour than does a 150# muscular woman jerking along at the same speed but with every muscle taut.

He eventually enumerates the virtues of exercise with respect to health, and his written article is complete enough that the balance surfaces in his argument. But his interviews that have hit the Internet miss all that, irresponsibly extolling the treatise that if it won't reduce weight, don't bother moving. As if weight loss were the only worthy goal. What about the shrinking population segment who doesn't need to lose weight? There just may be a reason that ALL people should exercise. Physical activity improves sleep, fitness, cardiac health, insulin sensitivity, mental health and immune function. It prevents diabetes, high blood pressure, cancer, heart disease and old people from falling over, fracturing hips and smashing their heads. An hour a day of mild to moderate movement leads to mental health, dissipating energy and irritability, and promotes sleep.

After going to great lengths to debunk the exercise – weight loss connection, at the very end of his article he promotes exercise as part of a weight loss program. But he doesn't call it exercise – he calls it physical activity. So all along, he has demonized exercise with his bias that defines it as sweating, aching, miserable, self-flaggelating activity. But really, it is just another name for physical activity and movement and something healthy.

Why couldn't he have used his adult, small voice? He could have said, "By the way, exercise alone won't cut the corpulence – it takes some prudent eating and non-gargantuan portion sizes to shed a few hundred extra pounds." But no, he had to use his third-grade bully voice to slander something that public health officials have begged people to do since the 1950's. Such irresponsibility. It's like shooting the dog because she couldn't bring in the paper, adore you AND make the coffee.