

# Sports Nutrition

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## EXERCISE & WEIGHT CONTROL: Myths, Truths and Gender Differences

*"For all the exercise I do, I should be pencil thin!" ... "Am I the only runner who has ever gained weight training for a marathon???" ... "Why does my husband shed pounds when he exercises and I don't???"*

When I listen to athletes complain about their lack of success with losing body fat, I hear abundant frustration: *"Why can't I do something as simple as lose a few pounds!???"* Because weight loss is complex and often includes debunking a few diet and exercise myths. Perhaps this article will offer some insights that lead you on the path to weight loss success.

### **Myth: You must exercise in order to lose body fat.**

To lose body fat, you must create a calorie deficit. You can create that deficit by adding on exercise (and improving your overall health and fitness) or by simply eating fewer calories. Sick people commonly lose weight by undereating; they do not exercise. Similarly, injured athletes can lose fat despite lack of exercise. The story "I gained weight when I was injured because I couldn't exercise" could more correctly be stated "I gained weight when I was injured because I was bored and depressed. I overate for comfort and entertainment..."

### **Myth: The more you exercise, the more body fat you lose.**

Often, the more you exercise, the hungrier you get—and the more you eat (or believe you "deserve" to eat to reward yourself for having both gotten to the gym and survived the exercise session). That is, if you spend 60 minutes in a spin class and burn off 600 calories, only to reward yourself with twelve Oreos (600 calories), you quickly cancel out your exercise efforts in less than 3 minutes.

The effects of exercise on weight loss are complex and unclear. We know among older people (56-78 years) who participated in a vigorous walking program, daily calorie needs remained about the same (2,400 without exercise, 2,480 with exercise). How could that be? Well, the participants napped more and were 62% less active in the rest of their day. (Goran *Am J Physiol* 263:E950, 1992)

Another study with post-menopausal women found the same results from 8 weeks of moderate exercise training. Their 24-hour energy expenditure remained similar from the start to the end of the program. (Keytel *Int J Sport Nutr* 11:226, 2001) You have to eat according to your *whole day's activity level*. Too much recovery time conserves calories!

### **Myth: When you train for a marathon, fat melts away.**

Wishful thinking. I commonly hear marathoners, triathletes and other highly competitive endurance athletes complain *"For all the exercise I do, I should be pencil thin..."* They fail to lose fat because, like the fitness exercisers discussed above, they put all of their energy into exercising, but then tend to be quite sedentary the rest of the day as they recover from their tough workouts. A study with male endurance athletes who reported a seemingly low calorie intake found

they were less active than their peers in the non-exercise parts of their day. (Thompson *Med Sci Sports* 27:347, 1995) The bottom line: You need to keep taking the stairs instead of the elevators, no matter how much you train!

Some marathoners who complain they eat like a bird, but fail to lose body fat, fail to acknowledge how much they actually eat. Among female marathoners, those with more body fat under-reported their food intake more than their leaner peers. (Edwards, *Med Sci Sports Exer* 25:1398, 1993)

### **Myth: Couples who exercise together, lose fat together.**

In a 16-month study looking at exercise for weight loss, men and women completed an identical amount of exercise. The men lost 11.5 pounds; the women gained 1.3 pounds! (Donnelly *Arch Intern Med* 163:1343, 2003) In another study with previously sedentary, normal weight men and women who participated in an 18 month marathon training program, the men increased their calorie intake by about 500 per day; the women increased by only 60 calories—despite having added on 50 miles per week of running. The men lost ~5 pounds; the women none. (Janssen, *Int'l J Sports Med*, 10:51, 1989)

What's going on here??? Well, a husband who adds on exercise is likely to lose more weight than his wife because he's likely heavier and thereby burns more calories during the same workout. But also, Nature seems to be protective of women's role as child bearer, and wants women to maintain adequate body fat for nourishing healthy babies.

Obesity researchers at NY's Columbia University suggest a pound of fat-loss in men equates to a deficit of about 2,500 calories, while women need a 3,500 calorie deficit!!! No wonder women have a tougher time losing fat than do men.... (Pietrobelli *Int J Obes Relat Metab Disord* 26:1339, 2002)

**The bottom line:** If you are exercising to lose weight, I encourage you to separate exercise and weight. Yes, you should exercise for health, fitness, stress relief and, most importantly, for *enjoyment*. (After all, the E in exercise stands for enjoyment!) I discourage you from exercising to burn off calories. Under those conditions, exercise feels like punishment for having excess body fat. When exercise is something you do to your body, rather than do for your body, you'll eventually stop exercising.

Instead of focusing on exercise to lose fat, pay attention to your calorie intake. Knocking off just 100 calories a day from your evening snacks can theoretically result in 10 pounds a year of fat loss. Seems simpler than hours of sweating...?

Sports dietitian Nancy Clark MS, RD counsels casual and competitive athletes in her private practice at Healthworks (617-383-6100), the premier fitness center in Chestnut Hill MA. Her *Sports Nutrition Guidebook* (\$23), *Food Guide for Marathoners* (\$20) and *Cyclist's Food Guide* (\$20) all offer weight management information. The books are available via [www.nancyclarkrd.com](http://www.nancyclarkrd.com) or by sending a check to Sports Nutrition Services, PO Box 650124, W Newton MA 02465.

