

Gain Strength, Lose Weight: Claims vs. Reality

December 28, 2010 | Comments: 1

Many books, websites, and personal trainers tout strength training as a fast way to shed pounds and lose body fat without dieting. Here's a look at the claims.

CLAIM: Strength training increases resting metabolism (the rate at which the body burns calories), which means your body burns calories at a higher rate even when not exercising.

REALITY: True, but how much it goes up and for how long depends on how intensely you train and which muscles you work. Some studies have found that resting metabolism stays up for 14 hours or longer; others show it goes back to normal within an hour after exercising. But average gym-goers don't work out long enough or hard enough to achieve any significant calorie-burning after-effect. More significant are the calories you burn while strength training. There is nothing magical about strength training itself: all exercise—particularly aerobic exercise—can increase metabolic rate to some degree.

CLAIM: Strength training builds muscle, and muscle burns far more calories than fat.

REALITY: Strength training builds muscle, but you have to train strenuously and long term to add a significant amount. And even then, the impact on body weight is usually small. One pound of muscle typically burns five to eight calories a day, though this depends on many variables according to Dr. Robert Wolfe, at the University of Arkansas. (Don't believe pie-in-the-sky claims that a pound of muscle burns a whopping 50 to 100 calories a day.) A man who does strength training three times a week for six months, for example, may gain four to six pounds of muscle. That would result in 20 to 48 extra calories burned a day—not much, considering that you need a deficit of about 500 calories a day to lose a pound a week.

Words to the wise: A balanced workout should include both a cardiovascular (aerobic) workout and strength training exercises. But if your primary goal is to lose weight, focus mainly on aerobic exercise (such as running, biking, skating, or brisk walking) four or more days a week for at least 45 minutes. This burns more calories and is more likely to significantly boost your metabolic rate afterwards than strength training.