



Worry about fitness, not fat

Can you be fat and fit? People who are overweight or obese are commonly advised to begin an exercise program. Certainly, a lack of physical activity is thought to be one of the major reasons for the current epidemic of obesity in the United States.

Strangely enough, many studies on physical activity and weight loss indicate that regular physical activity is more effective at preventing weight gain than it is at producing weight loss.

So is exercise a waste of time for overweight people? Absolutely not! A great deal of research shows that exercise is very beneficial for everyone, especially overweight people. It indicates that, in fact, you can be fat and fit.

Many health risks associated with obesity, such as cardiovascular disease, are greatly reduced by regular activity.

So, if you are frustrated with exercise because your weight is not dropping, maybe you need to change your focus. Believe it or not, you may be more healthy than your thin couch potato counterpart who seems to have a

hollow leg and gets away with eating anything.

The benefits of an active lifestyle are much more important for long-term health than for short-term weight loss. Ideal body weight should be determined more by what works best for an individual than by how well they fit into typical height and weight tables.

Genetically speaking, we have each been dealt a deck of cards by our parents that determines our body type. This puts limits on what constitutes a healthy body-weight range for each of us.

A few tricks, however, can gradually increase the effect of exercise on weight loss. Over the long run, regular daily physical activity helps to normalize the appetite. So, an active person can have more confidence that their appetite matches their calorie needs.

Whether the exercise is low or high intensity doesn't seem to make much difference. Over the long run, it seems to be a matter of how many calories are burned, not necessarily how fast they were burned.

If you enjoy higher-intensity exercise, you can burn calories faster by working harder at any type of exercise. But many people find lower-intensity exercises to be safer and more enjoyable. They just need to put in a little more time to burn up the same amount of calories.

The ideal exercise program includes a mix of lower-intensity aerobic exercise, such as walking, jogging, and cycling a few days a week with a couple days of higher-intensity strength training such as weight lifting or other resistance exercises.

Aerobic exercise burns calories and trains the body to be better at burning fat, while the strength training increases muscle mass and the amount of calories burned at rest.

If you exercise because you know it is good for your health and it makes you feel better, you are more likely to make it a permanent part of your lifestyle than if you are just doing it for weight loss. And, again, you really can be fat and fit.

Alan Titchenal, Ph.D, CNS and Joannie Dobbs, Ph.D, CNS
are nutritionists in the Department of Human Nutrition, Food and Animal Sciences,
College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources, UH-Manoa.
Dr. Dobbs also works with the University Health Service.
