[IMAGE]

6 Common-Sense Strategies to Get in Great Shape

By Dr. Perry Nickelston

Legendary martial artist Bruce Lee once said, "Simplicity is the key to brilliance." He was right. In the world of fitness and exercise, simple principles give you the best results. Getting into shape does not have to be difficult. Contrary to popular opinion, you don't need to annihilate yourself with grueling workouts that would exhaust most professional athletes. It's not about training hard, it's about training smart.

When sculpting a lean physique, quantity is not nearly as important as quality. You don't need to spend endless hours on expensive equipment, either. Walk into the majority of fitness clubs these days and you'll be overwhelmed by the sheer volume of exercise equipment. It's hard to know where to begin. Not only is it intimidating, but in reality, none of these fancy machines with innumerable moving parts is necessarily more effective in building a lean, muscular, functional body.

Complex does not mean better. You are about to discover simple exercise strategies that can be done easily, quickly and with great results, even if you are a beginner. So, what should you be doing? Good question. Let's get into some simple fitness tips and strategies to help you reach your goals.

1. Get Off the Machines

man lifting weight - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark Free weights require more muscle activation for stabilization and control of movements, which means you burn more calories with every exercise. Muscles require energy to contract; the more energy you use with a movement, the more calories you burn and the leaner you get – assuming you don't overdo training and maintain good form.

An effective exercise strategy is to perform compound, multi-joint free-weight movements that integrate the upper and lower body. For example, instead of simply standing in one place doing biceps curls for your arms, add alternating single-leg lunges while curling. You now get the metabolic effect of using the lower-body leg muscles and the added challenge of controlling the upper-body free weight. There is no need to go as heavy on the weights since the body must use more muscle to control proper balance.

Lifting free weights conditions the body to release substances (hormones, enzymes) that promote fat breakdown and encourage muscle building. You can capitalize on fat breakdown with a minimum of three days a week of weight training. This frequency encourages additional glycogen usage and storage, preventing carbohydrates from being stored as fat.

Try this fat-shredding free-weight routine: Do six sets of 12 repetitions per multi-joint movement (for example, biceps curls combined with lunges) with only 15 seconds of rest between sets. The nice thing here is you get the fat loss *and* cumulative volume muscle fatigue benefits of minimal rest between sets.

2. Fine Tune Your Cardio

The timing of your cardiovascular workouts affects your fat-loss / muscle-mass equation. Cardio promotes fat loss, but do too much and you may also get hit with a decrease in strength, muscle and metabolism. Doing cardio workouts three times a week (minimum) in the morning before breakfast is ideal to capitalize on maximum fat burning. Since you will not have eaten for several hours, your body will be unable to recruit its stores of carbohydrates for fuel, and will instead burn stored body fat for energy. So, you burn more body fat in less time. If a morning cardio workout is not possible, then it is recommended after weight training, not before.

Implementing a simple strategy of cardio after weight training will also have a significant positive impact on preventing fatigue and turbo-charging fat loss. This capitalizes on the hormone optimization principle of surging growth hormone and testosterone (yes, this concept applies to women, too) to accelerate fat loss and increase lean muscle tone.

3. Keep Yourself Hydrated

Did you know that being dehydrated makes you fatter? Why? Because muscle glycogen (sugar energy created from ingested carbohydrates)is stored along with water. For every gram of glycogen in the muscle, there should be three of water. Dehydration forces glucose to remain in the bloodstream instead of muscle until it reaches the liver for overflow storage. When the liver is full, the glycogen (sugar) has no place to go but your *fat* cells. Not good!

Your body is predominantly made up of water. It doesn't look that way in the mirror, but I assure you, without water you'd be nothing but a pile of assorted amino acids, minerals and some fatty acids. If we were to consider a single human cell, we'd be looking at a molecular structure that's between 70-85 percent

water. Water is the primary component of blood. Water transports oxygen throughout the body.

pouring water - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark In short, water is an essential nutrient and perhaps the most neglected nutrient among individuals attempting to figure out "the best diet." When you perspire, you lose water; thus, it becomes even more vital for anyone committed to an intense exercise program. While the old, but unsubstantiated rule of eight glasses per day has held up just fine, multiplying your weight by .55 will give you a pretty good estimate of the ounces of water an *exerciser* should consume in a day. If you live in a warm climate and/or you're in a hot environment all day, be it outdoor construction or fueling an indoor furnace, you should make a concerted effort to increase your intake a bit higher.

If you don't want to do all this math and measure ounces, I suggest you always have water with you. A bottle of spring water should be fine. Sipping it throughout the day, even if you are not experiencing thirst, can act as a valuable step in helping to mobilize fat and keep cells healthy.

4. Plan Your Work and Work Your Plan

How can you hit a target you can't even see? You must set your goals and then document your progress via a journal, computer or cell phone application. This is the only verifiable way you can determine what does and does not work over time. Write down everything, from what you eat to when you eat, training programs, how you felt during and after workouts, etc. Take pictures of yourself as you progress to attach the visible senses to your goal.

woman using labtop - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark Is this a lot of work? Yes! But how badly do you want to reach your goal? This is where the rubber meets the road and keeping a journal separates the serious from the dabblers.

Everyone who has ever achieved any success in this world has first had a plan; something that helped guide them in the right direction. We need a plan in order to see beyond "square one." There's tomorrow, a week from now, a month from now, a year from now and even longer than that – and if you formulate your action plan for getting into shape *now*, every day you'll get that much closer. A plan also clarifies more than just what you want to do; it clarifies what you have *been doing*, and is a valuable cross-referencing tool for adjustments in your methods and process. That way, you keep improving. This is true for exercise and diet. Outline a plan that includes what you want to do, what changes you must make to do it, and what the end result will be if you follow it. In fact, a diet will outline what you can and cannot do in order to meet your

goal; both on a daily basis and in a general sense. Without this group of signposts on your way, how could you possibly have any direction?

5. Focus on the Core

For most people, your workout is motivated (at least to some degree) by the drive to improve your appearance. A prime target related to that goal invariably involves the elusive abdominals. Most people target the midsection with crunches or sit-ups. Although these are good examples of isolation exercises for the abdominals, you should also integrate alternative exercises that develop strength within *all* muscle groups of the core. This will provide you with the best foundation to push through the tough workouts in pursuit of your best body.

When you focus exclusively on the abdominals by performing isolation exercises such as crunches, you compromise your core's true strength and maximum performance potential; which doesn't make it any easier to get lean for summer. A great exercise to maximize your core strength is the chop and lift. This is a great core exercise because it targets basic movement patterns that rely on the synergistic efforts of the abdominals, the back extensors and the hips. It also involves upper-body muscle groups during the torso and arm movements. The chop and lift is best done using a high-low cable machine (you've seen it in your local gym; it's usually on either "post" of an exercise rack, can be raised or lowered by pulling a pin and lets you attach a handle, bar, etc., and adjust the amount of weight) or resistance bands. The chop and lift may be performed in a variety of lower-body positions for variable intensity purposes.

exercise formula - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark *How to do it:* The chopping movement is downward movement of the cable or band across the body from high to low; the lifting movement is upward movement across the body from a low to high position. You're pulling the cable / band across the body and then returning it to the start position. The progression from beginner to advanced is as follows: tall-kneeling (i.e., both knees grounded), half-kneeling (i.e., one knee grounded), squat stance (i.e., standing with both feet in the same plane), and scissors stance (i.e., standing in lunge position). Your doctor can explain exactly how to perform the exercise correctly.

Progressing the chop and lift from the kneeling to standing position develops core strength at the hips without interference or compensation from the legs. Legs that are too powerful and dominant over the hamstrings may compensate for hip weakness, negating optimal core strength. The progression from a symmetrical to an asymmetrical stance (tall-kneeling to half-kneeling, etc.) highlights strength imbalances

between the sides of the body. The chop and lift helps develop cross-body patterning movements, facilitating symmetrical muscle tone and balance.

6. Don't Fear the Deadlift

Deadlifts are by far one of the best exercises for producing overall strength and lean muscle. There is no reason to be afraid of performing a proper deadlift; the operative word being *proper*. When done correctly using the hips, glutes and thighs, rather than the lower back, deadlifting is probably the most effective exercise for toning muscle. And believe it or not, women, this is the most powerful exercise for toning and shaping your rear end, period!

Deadlifting is a great exercise to use even if your only goal is to lose weight and look better. The reason is because it stimulates a lot of muscle, which helps to jack up your fat-burning metabolism and build *more* lean muscle. Machine movements such as leg extensions, leg curls and the inner and outer thigh machines could never compare to a good set of deadlifts.

Deadlifts allow you to build muscle in your upper and lower back, glutes and hamstrings. Why waste your time working through countless other exercises when you can get such amazing results with a single one? Long story short: If you want to transform your body and/or get stronger, then you should be deadlifting.

How do you do a deadlift? It's easy: With a barbell or a pair of dumbbells on the floor in front of you, grab the weight(s) with both hands, stand up straight and then lower it back to the ground. Remember, use your hips, glutes and thighs (keep your hips down, butt out); don't rely on your arms or round your back. You're working the lower body, not the upper with this one. Again, ask your doctor about proper performance of this important exercise.

Since the deadlift recruits many muscles, your smaller and weaker muscles tend to fatigue before your larger, stronger muscles. If your weaker muscles are giving out and you keep pulling for more reps, you could be setting yourself up for injury. So keep your repetition range to around six in the beginning and go slowly, staying true to the quality of the movement.

How can you start to include deadlifts in your current exercise program? Simple – just start doing them one to two times a week. If you are a beginner, then deadlifting twice a week could be the way to go; that way, your body can start to adapt to the movement pattern, and your strength levels will increase at a fast rate.

Keeping It Simple

Despite our willingness to blame ourselves, our genetics or our hectic schedules, when fitness or weight-loss failure arises, it's often the result of flawed information destroying achievement potential. It's *misinformation* swallowing up the fitness hopes of someone with good intentions. Most of the mistakes we make when trying to get in shape involve actions (or a lack of action) that neglect the importance of the critical relationship between eating like an athlete, exercising aerobically in moderation, and challenging muscle. All three elements are crucial if the goal is a long-term positive physical change. Once you learn to apply these strategies in a manner that fits comfortably into your life, you'll find the payoff for the time you invest in exercise to be significant and extremely rewarding. When you implement these strategies, fitness failure will no longer be an option!

Muscle: The True Fat-Burning Machine

While aerobic exercise does increase short-term metabolism, it is a mistake to believe it is the secret to fat loss. Muscle is metabolically active tissue. When fat is burned, it actually has to be released into the bloodstream and shuttled into a muscle cell, where it is burned as fuel. Muscle, therefore, is the true fat-burning machine. If you increase muscle mass, even slightly, you increase caloric burn, not only while you exercise, but also while you eat, sleep and think.

Slow and Steady: Remember to *Rest*

woman sleeping - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark As I've said before, one of the primary reasons people fail in their attempt to lose weight and get in shape is that they try to accomplish too much too soon. They are so inspired to exercise that they usually end up overtraining by working out too much. Another word for overtraining is *burnout*! Doing a massive volume of sets, reps, and days of training without adequate time to rest and recover is the quickest way to sabotage your progress. Muscles grow when you're resting them, not working them.

One of the little-known secrets of getting into shape is more rest between workouts. In the fitness industry, rest is known as the *silent workout*. Working out breaks muscles down; resting allows the body to regenerate and build more lean muscle. The simple workout principle is get in, train smart, get out, rest, and eat properly.

The biggest obstacle to more rest is your own mindset. We tend to think that if we don't go 150 percent, we are slacking off. It is a struggle in the beginning to follow this principle, but if you stick with it for just one month, you will see enormous positive changes in your body. Extreme training follows a vicious cycle in breaking down the body. When you train hard and don't see progress, your first instinct is to go even harder. Keep in mind that's the exact *opposite* of what you should do.

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