

# Aim for little and often

The key to a successful exercise habit is to find something you enjoy and do it consistently, write

**Colin Dunlevy and Carole Wrixon**

**A** recurrent question we're asked by people trying to control or lose weight is: "Can you show me some exercise to tighten my tummy and lose the 'pouch'?" The person is often surprised when the expected drill of sit-ups, tummy crunches or another abdominal routine is not proposed. We routinely have to explain ourselves and the bizarre logic of not starting with the expected abdominal calisthenics.

We feel that such a regime in isolation would be largely ineffective. Fat on the midriff is not there because the digestive tract has expanded to a point where it pushes everything further outward. The abdominal muscles and other body structures remain in place. The pouch is just fat tissue, and the reason that it is stored there is that the body has been programmed by its DNA to store it there. Likewise for the so called 'bingo wings', double chin or the issue that leads to the question that all men dread: "Does my bottom look big in this?"

This fat just shows that the body has been consuming more calories than it has been able to use. It turns this excess energy into fat for hungrier times. If such times don't come and the fat is allowed to accumulate, health problems aren't far behind and this is the real problem with excess weight.

So the real issue is to work out how to get the body to use its stored fat reserves and to get a better balance between energy in and energy out. The best way to do that is to follow the old mantra... "Eat less and move more".

### Walking works

Science and research has taught us a lot about human movement. One fundamental type of movement that has been studied over and over is walking. We know lots and lots about it. We know walking:

- Uses more energy than sitting
- Uses lots of your muscles in a very ordered way including your abdominal muscles
- Benefits even those with joint pain who can find a very therapeutic effect from walking when it's done correctly within the limits of pain.

We also know that walking benefits the:

- Mind
- Quality of life
- Heart health
- Pain management
- Your weight.

Walking is a great and natural starting place and is where we normally start our advice. We recommend people:

- Start slowly, with walks of short duration
- Monitor the amount of time they spend walking rather than the distance they cover
- Do it daily.

If you feel your are starting to get a sore back or knee after five minutes, stop before the pain comes and then continue with the same thing the next day. A walking stick might help if you have pain. Look on the stick as a help and not a statement of advancing age.

### You must exercise every day

Some people have an insurmountable block to walking; they just can't do it, it's too sore, too boring or just not for them. No problem. Other activities will have similar benefits such as cycling, swimming, walking in the pool or using the treadmill at home in front of the TV watching the soaps. The trick is that whatever

your activity might be, it must be done routinely; that means every day.

For you to do an activity daily or at least on most days, you have to look forward to it. If it's a really hard workout, sure you will feel great after it's finished, but will you look forward to it or stick with it for years? So do it at your own pace.

Ask yourself when you're nearly finished your routine, "Will I look forward to this tomorrow?" If the answer is "eh... not really" then back off a little and go a little slower. Be patient with it; you will get plenty of health benefits from exercising at an easy pace. If you stick with it the health benefits will be a lot more than a few weeks of slogging it out before getting fed up and stopping.

### Regard exercise as medicine

Look on exercise as a type of medicine. As with most medications for lifelong conditions, the medicine has to be taken routinely for it to work. If the medicine is too hard to take and doesn't agree with you, you'll probably stop taking it. So do your exercise medicine in a manner that does agree with you; do it easy. Make it a habit rather than a chore. Routine exercise even at an easy pace will have health benefits.

### Keep an eye on your blood sugars

When you're trying to manage type 2 diabetes, it's a good idea to see how the exercise you do affects your blood sugars. Testing your blood glucose levels before, during and after exercise can provide information about this. It may not be necessary to do this daily, but may be a good idea when you're starting off or changing things in your routine. It should give you a good idea of how your body deals with exercise and how this is reflected in your blood sugars.

Any exercise is going to speed up the rate at which the body uses up its energy

# BACK TO BASICS

stores. In some cases, and more so for people with type 1 diabetes, planned exercise may result in a low blood sugar. This can lead to a person feeling that they should be eating more. A better option may be to adjust the dose of your medication to get your blood sugars back on track; you may need to do this with the advice of the diabetes team.

If you are exercising to help with weight loss, you want your exercise to use up calories. If you eat more to compensate for the exercise you're doing, you are simply replacing the calories you have burned up, and often more along with them.

## Carbs are important

Carbohydrate or 'carbs' are sometimes demonised in the media, but are in fact very important and are the body's main source of easily usable fuel. Carbohydrates include foods such as breads, grains, cereals, potatoes and sugars.

The amount of carbohydrate we need depends on the level of activity. People often make the mistake of overeating carbs when they exercise. It can be difficult to estimate how many calories have been burned off through a particular exercise and how this translates to the amount of carbohydrates or food calories in general. This commonly undermines people's efforts to lose weight.

Unless you are doing more than an hour's constant exercise, you won't need to eat more than usual. So remember, as with most things, moderation with carbohydrates is important.

The recommended amount of carbohydrates can be achieved with regular meals and occasional small healthy snacks, spread evenly across the day. A good quantity of carbs to have and enough for anyone exercising regularly is, for example:

- A medium (60g) bowl of high fibre cereal in the morning
- Two slices of wholegrain bread with your soup at lunch
- A banana for a snack
- 3-4 egg-size potatoes at your evening meal.

Sweets and confectionary are high in simple sugars (and fats) and will raise

your blood sugars too quickly so aren't the best option. On the other hand, complex starchy carbohydrates take longer to break down, so will keep you going for longer. For example, higher fibre breakfast cereals, potatoes, rice and pasta.

Fats, for example, oils, butter, fried chips and chocolate, can also be used to produce energy or fuel, but take longer than carbohydrates to break down. For that reason they aren't as efficient when being used for energy and should be eaten in minimal quantities.

There is also a common misconception that we need lots of extra protein when exercising. This is not the case. Protein is rarely used for energy when we exercise. Its role is in growth and repair of our body's tissues, so its function is more important in training and recovery in high level endurance sports, rather than easy day to day exercise.

Recommendations for protein are 1g of protein per kg of body weight per person per day. For an average person this is easily achieved with moderate portions of lean meat and low fat dairy foods. For example:

- A glass of low-fat milk with breakfast
- A grilled chicken breast at lunch time
- Two slices of lean beef steak with the rest of your balanced evening meal.

The best natural sources of protein that are also low in fat include:

- Lean meats, for example chicken and turkey
- Fish
- Eggs
- Low-fat or skimmed milk
- Low-fat yogurts
- Pulses.

## What about fluids?

So now we know what the best foods to consume are, what are the best fluids? When we exercise, our bodies produce extra heat and sweat is produced to cool us down. How much fluid we actually lose depends on how hard we exercise, how long we exercise for, the temperature outside and our individual body differences.

It's usually recommended that the average person needs approximately two litres

of water daily, but we need more if we are highly active. To prevent becoming dehydrated, it's a good idea to drink plenty of fluid before, during and after exercise. Thirst is a poor indicator of dehydration, so don't wait until you feel thirsty to have a drink.

## Avoid 'sports drinks'

But what to drink? 'Sports drinks' refer to a wide range of products containing water, sugar and electrolytes (potassium and sodium). Although they're good at replacing lost fluids, they contain lots of sugar which will increase blood glucose in people with diabetes, and add lots of extra calories and cancel out any weight loss benefits from your exercise.

The exception to this advice is for some people with type 1 diabetes; sometimes a sports drink is needed to help balance their blood sugars, but in general they are not helpful for people, especially those with type 2 diabetes. Water is easily the best option for hydration and like walking it's free! If you struggle drinking plain water, you can add a no-added sugar squash to liven it up a bit.

So the take home message is to aim for:

- A healthy balance of starchy carbohydrates for fuel
- Lean protein for muscle growth and repair
- Plenty of fruit and vegetables to provide vitamins
- Water to keep you hydrated.

If you follow this you will give your body all it needs to run like a well-oiled machine. The exercise you do should be easy to do and a daily habit that you stick to. It's better to do a little bit in an easy way for the whole year than being too ambitious at the start and having to give up after a few weeks. Remember exercise is a habit not a punishment, so aim for a little and often.

---

**Colin Dunlevy, PhD, MISCP is a Chartered Physiotherapist; and Carole Wrixon, BSc, PgDip, MSc is a Dietitian. Both work at the endocrine unit in St Columcilles Hospital, Loughlinstown, Co. Dublin. This is a specialist centre for weight management and diabetes.**