

Weight Loss

Myths

1 Electrical belts or electrical stimulation help to tone the muscles without having to go to the gym

Electrical stimulation is often used in rehabilitation to stimulate muscle contraction in atrophied or very weak muscles. However, there is no evidence that it works in healthy individuals.

Furthermore, the frequency used to stimulate muscle contraction is low and turning up the frequency may cause discomfort and pain. Users are advised to incorporate a healthy diet and regular exercise to see results and any positive effects cannot be attributed to electrical stimulation.

2 Weight training can convert fat to muscle

Contrary to popular belief, fat does not become muscle with weight training. Fat and muscle are different tissues. Weight training maintains muscle mass or increases muscle bulk, while aerobic exercise may result in muscle and fat loss. A balance of both is thus recommended.

For beginners, regular exercise means most days of the week (five out of seven). An example of a simple exercise regimen consists of brisk walking at least thrice a week, 30 minutes a day (either continuous or intermittent periods of 10 minutes) and weight training of large muscle groups at least twice a week, two to three sets of eight to 15 repetitions.

3 I walk every day and eat very little, why am I still this size?

Walking has been shown to be one of the best exercises for health (Rippe JM et al, Walking for Health and Fitness, JAMA, 1988, 259, 2720-2724). However, for it to be effective for weight loss, you will need to walk moderately fast (and this is determined by one's heart rate) and continuously for at least 30 minutes.

A study in 1995 showed that that after losing significant weight, the reduced-obese person tends to expend less energy for the same activity even when the reduced body weight is accounted for (Foster GD et al, The Energy Cost of Walking Before and After Significant Weight Loss, Medicine and Science in Sports and Exercise, 1995, 27, page 888-894). So, change up your exercise regimen every four to six months to get the optimum weight loss results.

4 I cannot exercise because I feel pain

Pain is a symptom we cannot ignore. However, it should not be an excuse for halting all exercise. Exercises can be modified and, for some conditions, exercises help to strengthen the relevant muscles, thus reducing the pain.

A simple example would be 'leg raises' which strengthen quadriceps muscles, which may then help to alleviate knee pain. See a doctor and a physiotherapist to recommend the appropriate exercises for your condition and lifestyle.



When it comes to losing weight, we seem to have a rather weighty issue on our hands. With the multitude of gimmicks and gadgets out in the market, often promising weight loss within a short period of time, how do we know what actually works? Cindy Ng, principal physiotherapist, Singapore General Hospital, lends a hand.

5 Does heat therapy or sweating help in weight loss?

Weight loss as a result of heat in any form is due to water loss, and therefore only temporary. There is also no evidence of 'fat melting' via heat therapy.

6 Vibration therapy helps to break down the fat

There is a lack of data to support these claims (Prisby et al, Effects of whole body vibration on the skeleton and other organ systems in man and animal models: What we know and what we need to know. Ageing Research Reviews, 2008, 7, p319-329). Although there is some promise of it increasing lean body mass in untrained females and increased energy expenditure in young males, there is no change in body weight.

7 Doing sit ups will give me a flat tummy

If only! But the cold, hard truth is that sit ups alone will not flatten the tummy. Firstly, a healthy diet and regular exercise (aerobic and resistance training) are important to lose the belly fat. Secondly, sit ups or crunches have to be done in the correct manner, keeping the back well supported, avoiding straining the neck muscles and breathing correctly during the exercises. Thirdly, you should modify the exercises based on the strength of your abdominal muscles. Consult an exercise specialist or physiotherapist regarding this. For individuals with spinal or back problems, sit ups may not be suitable. Try simple pelvic floor muscle exercises, crunches or reverse crunches instead.