

Why Exercise Won't Make You Thin

By John Cloud



As I write this, tomorrow is Tuesday, which is a cardio day. I'll spend five minutes warming up on the VersaClimber, a towering machine that requires you to move your arms and legs simultaneously. Then I'll do 30 minutes on a stair mill. On Wednesday a personal trainer will work me like a farm animal for an hour, sometimes to the point that I am dizzy — an abuse for which I pay as much as I spend on groceries in a week. Thursday is "body wedge" class, which involves another exercise contraption, this one a large foam wedge from which I will push myself up in various hateful ways for an hour. Friday will bring a 5.5-mile run, the extra half-mile my grueling expiation of any gastronomical indulgences during the week. I have exercised like this — obsessively, a bit grimly — for years, but recently I began to wonder: Why am I doing this? Except for a two-year period at the end of an unhappy relationship — a period when I self-medicated with lots of Italian desserts — I have never been overweight. One of the most widely accepted, commonly repeated assumptions in our culture is that if you exercise, you will lose weight. But I exercise all the time, and since I ended that relationship and cut most of those desserts, my weight has returned to the same 163 lb. it has been most of my adult life. I still have gut fat that hangs over my belt when I sit. Why isn't all the exercise wiping it out?

It's a question many of us could ask. More than 45 million Americans now belong to



a health club, up from 23 million in 1993. We spend some \$19 billion a year on gym memberships. Of course, some people join and never go. Still, as one major study — the Minnesota Heart Survey — found, more of us at least say we exercise regularly. The survey ran from 1980, when only 47% of respondents said they engaged in regular exercise, to 2000, when the figure had grown to 57%.

And yet obesity figures have risen dramatically in the same period: a third

Whether because exercise makes us hungry or because we want to reward ourselves, many people eat more — and eat more junk food, like doughnuts — after going to the gym.

of Americans are obese, and another third count as overweight by the Federal Government's definition. Yes, it's entirely possible that those of us who regularly go to the gym would weigh even more if we exercised less. But like many other people, I get hungry after I exercise, so I often eat more on the days I work out than on the days I don't. Could exercise actually be keeping me from losing weight?

"In general, for weight loss, exercise is pretty useless," says Eric Ravussin, chair in diabetes and metabolism at Louisiana State University and a prominent exercise researcher. Many recent studies have found that exercise isn't as important in helping people lose weight as you hear so regularly in gym advertisements or on shows like *The Biggest Loser* — or, for that matter, from magazines like this one.



The basic problem is that while it's true that exercise burns calories and that you must burn calories to lose weight, exercise has another effect: it can stimulate hunger. That causes us to eat more, which in turn can negate the weight-loss benefits we just accrued. Exercise, in other words, isn't necessarily helping us lose weight. It may even be making it harder.

Some research has found that the obese already "exercise" more than most of the rest of us. In May, Dr. Arn Eliasson of the Walter Reed Army Medical Center reported the results of a small study that found that overweight people actually expend significantly more calories every day than people of normal weight — 3,064 vs. 2,080. He isn't the first researcher to reach this conclusion. As science writer Gary Taubes noted in his 2007 book *Good Calories, Bad Calories: Fats, Carbs, and the Controversial Science of Diet and Health*, "The obese tend to expend more energy than lean people of comparable height, sex, and bone structure, which means their metabolism is typically burning off more calories rather than less."

In short, it's what you eat, not how hard you try to work it off, that matters more in losing weight. You should exercise to improve your health, but be warned: fiery spurts of vigorous exercise could lead to weight gain. I love how exercise makes me feel, but tomorrow I might skip the VersaClimber — and skip the blueberry bar that is my usual postexercise