

OPTIMA

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Whether they're motivated by a bulging beer belly, jean-splitting saddle bags or the dreaded bingo wings many people will endeavour to lose some weight and "tone up" after the Christmas period. For most this will involve cutting back on the amount they eat and hitting the cardiovascular equipment (treadmill, bike, cross trainer, rower etc) in their local gym for marathon sessions. This approach seems to make sense, as to lose weight you need to produce an energy deficit – i.e. to burn more calories than you are consuming. However this pincer attack of reducing calories consumed and increasing calories burned is not the whole story... there is a third front!

For many years resistance training was seen as the preserve of body builders and athletes and those wishing to "bulk up" with extra muscle. Many people still have the misconception that if they so much as look at a pair of dumbbells they will end up resembling an Eastern bloc power lifter. It's simply not the case. Most fitness professionals now agree that the most effective weight loss method is to reduce calorie intake and undertake a combination of cardiovascular and resistance training.

The word resistance can be applied to many different types of training, all with the same aim – to put the muscle under tension to force it to work. Examples include free weights: such as barbells and dumbbells; machines: such as the pec deck or leg press; elastic resistance: the large rubber bands used by many trainers as well as in classes; and callisthenics: body weight exercises like press-ups and sit-ups.

Resistance training can be used for a variety of purposes and must therefore be tailored to produce the required results. The main purpose of including it in a weight loss program is to maintain as much muscle mass as possible whilst still losing fat. Maintaining a higher level of muscle mass has several advantages: firstly, because muscle is metabolically active it requires additional calories every day just to maintain normal function, so the more muscle you have, the more calories you will burn every day. This makes maintaining a healthy weight easier as your metabolic rate is higher. Secondly, shapely legs, arms and abs are not produced by skin and bone but by the muscle lying underneath, so no matter how much weight you lose, if you don't include resistance training to build well-toned muscles you will simply

look like, well... skin and bones!

So how can you benefit from resistance training? Note that if you want to lose weight, then you need to ensure that you're still reducing the amount you eat and training aerobically 3 times per week for 20-40 minutes per session. This will ensure that you're producing the negative energy balance required to lose weight.

For beginners the best form of resistance training is to use the variety of machines available in your gym, as they hold you in the correct position and reduce the chance of injury. Select one machine for each muscle group of the body (normally stated on the side of the machine, or ask an instructor). To start, pick a weight at which you can perform eight repetitions (completed movements) with the last two becoming very hard. Once you have completed all the reps move onto the next machine and do

the same thing, and continue this until you have worked every muscle group once. This should mean between eight and 12 machines depending on your gym. This is the important bit – try to keep a record of what you do each time and try to better it next time, by doing a few more reps or increasing the weight. A good plan is to perform eight reps in week one, ten reps in week two, and 12 reps in week three; in week four increase

the weight and start again at eight reps. The importance of gentle progression cannot be overstated: it is only by continually challenging yourself and your muscles that you will see the results you desire.

Aim to include resistance training once per week to start with and gradually increase the amount of sets (a completed number of reps) each session. As with all new training listen to your body and start slowly; look to make little regular increases rather than large irregular jumps – your body will thank you. If you're pregnant or suffer from any serious illness/injury then it's best to get a GP's consent first and work with a professional to ensure your safety. If you find that you really enjoy resistance training then there is a myriad of different ways to train, and always something new to learn – it is a science in itself.

And finally... a little muscle soreness is normal in the first few weeks and is nothing to worry about. It will soon fade as your fitness increases.

Happy Training!

Resistance Training

For many people this New Year's resolution will be the same as ever: to get fit and lose weight.

Fitness coach **Craig O'Toole** offers some early advice on how to approach a perennial problem.