

SCIENCE

Myths About Exercise

No pain, no gain? Yeah, that's just one more exercise saying that means squat.

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MYTH #1

Cardio is more important than weights.

MYTHBUSTER Nope—they're equally important. Cardio gets you a stronger heart, lower blood pressure, better blood sugar regulation, clearer thinking, improved mood, and sounder sleep, and these benefits are amplified when it's combined with strength training. Lifting weights helps strengthen bones, reduce injury risk, and protect posture; the muscle you build can help enhance your metabolism, says Ari Levy, M.D., founder and CEO of Shift, an integrative medical practice in Chicago. Aim for what researchers call the "Goldilocks Zone" of physical activity: 150 minutes per week of moderate-intensity aerobic exercise (challenging enough that you can talk, but not sing) or 75 minutes per week of vigorous aerobic activity plus muscle-strengthening activity at least twice per week.

MYTH #2

You shouldn't work out if your back is hurting.

MYTHBUSTER Chronic back pain (or shoulder, hip, or knee pain) often responds extremely well to exercise, which enhances the delivery of blood, nutrients, and lubricating fluid to the affected areas, easing stiffness and speeding healing. "As the saying goes," says Dr. Levy, "motion is lotion, rest is rust." (The American College of Rheumatology also endorses regular physical activity for relief of arthritis pain.) Note that we're talking about *chronic* aches and pains—acute injuries, which should be evaluated by a medical pro to rule out anything serious, often do require a day or so of rest. But if it's just the usual creakiness, ask your internist or physical therapist to help you craft a safe, effective exercise plan that doesn't hurt and, in the long run, will help you heal.

MYTH #3

You should work out every day.

MYTHBUSTER Recovery is essential to avoiding injury and building strong muscles. After a strength-training workout, muscles are in a depleted state due to the breakdown of muscle fibers, so it's important to take one or two rest days per week to allow the fibers to be rebuilt. "After this process repeats itself over time, our muscles will be able to handle more stress," says Joseph Lipsky, P.T., of Reload Physical Therapy at Performix House in New York City. But don't just blob out: "The best recovery is active recovery," he says—like a 20-minute cardio session, which promotes blood flow and supports the rebuilding of muscle fibers. Getting at least eight hours of sleep per night, drinking about an ounce of water for each pound you weigh, and eating adequate calories for your goals improves recovery too.

MYTH #4

You can exercise to make up for overeating.

MYTHBUSTER Sorry, but exercise isn't the calorie burner it's made out to be, despite what you'll see on gym machines and trackers (those are just estimates). "You'd have to walk at a rate of three miles per hour for nearly two hours to burn off a typical serving of fries," says Renee J. Rogers, Ph.D., an associate professor in the University of Pittsburgh's Healthy Lifestyle Institute. And an energy-in-energy-out mindset can encourage disordered thinking about eating. Instead, says Rogers, aim for a holistic view, "flipping the conversation from *I'm going to run off last night's dinner* to *Exercise makes me feel better physically and mentally and reduces my stress.*" Exercise does help you maintain a healthy weight, but that's just one of the countless healthy reasons for doing it.



MYTH #5

If you exercise, you don't need to worry about the effects of sitting all day.

MYTHBUSTER Yeah, you do. When you're seated, you're moving very little, contributing to stiffness in everything from your muscles to your arteries, which is why excess sitting is linked to heart disease, diabetes, depression, and even memory impairment and dementia (possibly because less blood circulates to the brain). Some studies show that regular bouts of exercise may help somewhat in offsetting the effects of excess sitting, "but we don't have the evidence to say that for sure," Rogers says. "If you do 45 minutes on the elliptical but spend the rest of the day at your desk on Zoom calls, like many of us do, the independent risks of sitting, including an increase in all-cause mortality, still exist." Beyond your regular workout routine, break up sitting with two minutes of activity every hour. Stretch your legs; walk across your house; try a downward dog. A standing desk can help, and household chores like vacuuming and doing laundry count too.





MEN



WOMEN

MYTH #6

You're the only one who pees a little when you exercise.

MYTHBUSTER You're not—and exercise itself is not the problem. Your pelvic floor muscles are involved with stopping the flow of urine, and when they're weak, you can leak. About a quarter of women have weakened pelvic floors due to having carried and delivered children, obesity, chronic coughing, menopause, age-related loss of muscle tone, and the like. The result: stress incontinence, which means you may leak while working out and/or when sneezing or laughing, says women's health physical therapist Jill Hoefs, M.P.T. What to do? There are a number of possible solutions, including seeing a women's health physical therapist or trying a Kegel app that offers instructions, reminders, and progress tracking. In the meantime, try a product that's specifically designed to handle bladder leaks, like Poise pads and liners (they're different from feminine care products and better suited to handling leaks, even during exercise).