Why You May Not Be Losing Weight! 10 Common Mistakes

Mistake #1: You Rely on Cardio to Peel Off Pounds
For most women, sweaty aerobic exercise alone isn't enough. "Research shows that weight loss is minimal if it isn't accompanied by dieting," says Amy Luke, PhD, a nutritional epidemiologist at the Stritch School of Medicine at Loyola University Chicago. "We may compensate for the extra energy we're burning during physical activity by doing less the rest of the day, or more commonly, we feel famished after working out, so we eat more."

The Solution: Keep your diet in check. To drop a pound, which is 3,500 calories, in one week, aim to eat 300 fewer calories every day (300 x 7 = 2,100) while burning 300 calories from exercise five times a week (300 x 5 = 1,500). Follow our "Slimmer in 7 Days!" plan, not only to burn 1,500 calories a week but also to firm up from head to toe. Plus, to beat the post-workout hunger attack, pack a low-cal snack like a piece of fruit. "You plan for exercise. You need to plan what you're going to eat afterward," says John Porcari, PhD, a professor of exercise physiology at the University of Wisconsin at La Crosse and a FITNESS advisory board member. Drinking lots of water helps too.

Mistake #2: You Race Through Your Reps
Two things could be going on here: Either your weights are too light, which is often the case for women, or they're too heavy, and you're letting momentum or gravity take over. Either way, your muscles aren't being sufficiently challenged, which is why they're not getting more toned. "To see an improvement in definition, you need to have an increase in the protein content of muscle fibers, and that happens when the muscles are stressed and being called on to exert more force," Bushman explains.

The Solution: If you don't believe you've done just about all you can do by the end of a set, pick a heavier weight. "You want there to be a bit of strain on the second-to-last and last reps," Bushman says. Reach for a lighter dumbbell when you aren't moving the weight with steady control as you lift and lower.

Mistake #3: You Stick to the Bike for All Your Sweat Sessions
If you feel as though your thighs are getting bigger than you'd like, you may be overdoing the cycling. "On an exercise bike, you're working a very specific group of muscles, and if you're hitting it hard four or five times a week, you will see development there," says Gary Sforzo, PhD, a professor of exercise and sport sciences at Ithaca College in New York.

The Solution: Unless cycling is your competitive event, cut it to once or twice a week and fill the gap with a variety of on-your-feet activities, from using the elliptical trainer to taking a dance class. "Every exercise affects your legs in different ways," Sforzo says. When you do cycle, lower the resistance level and increase the speed, Bushman suggests. "It's the overload on the muscles that causes the increase in muscle mass," she adds.

Mistake #4: You Aim to Stay in the Fat-Burning Zone
It's no wonder you think you need to do this to lose weight: Many cardio machines tell you when you're above and below the zone. But this reason for sticking to low-intensity exercise has been completely debunked. "Because fat takes longer than carbs to be converted to energy, you burn a higher percentage of it when you're sitting or walking than when you're running. So the old thinking was that with low-intensity exercise you could torch body fat and lose weight," Porcari explains. But the theory didn't work in practice. "In one study, we had people walk or run for half an hour. On average, the walkers burned 240 calories, 44 percent of which were fat, so they burned 108 fat calories. The runners burned 450 calories, 24 percent of which were fat, so they burned 120 fat calories. Whether you look at total calories or fat calories, the runners clearly came out ahead," Porcari says.

The Solution: There's nothing wrong with low-intensity exercise, particularly if you have joint problems. "But to lose weight, you'll probably need to do it for longer than half an hour. Just for general health, the recommendation is 30 minutes five days a week," Porcari says.

Mistake #5: You Skip the Warm-Up
You may think you're saving time, but you're actually just compromising the first 5 to 10 minutes of your workout. "Your body literally needs to warm up so that blood flow increases, the nervous system wakes up, and the body starts to use energy and oxygen more efficiently," says Michael Bracko, a sports physiologist and director at the Institute for Hockey Research in Calgary. The upshot: Every step feels like less of a slog, and calorie burn kicks into high gear.
The Solution: Bracko says that the best warm-up is to do your chosen exercise at a low intensity. Runners, for example, should walk, then jog. "Keep at it until you break a sweat," Bracko says. Alternately, you can try "dynamic" stretches, which are moves that take your body through the range of motions you're about to do. For a runner, that can mean high knees, butt kicks, and forward, reverse, and side lunges. "Avoid static stretching, where you're holding poses for several counts. That actually calms the system down and can impair performance," Bracko adds.

Mistake #6: You Overcrunch Your Abs

If you're doing more than three sets of 15, you're wasting your time. "Extra crunches aren't going to cinch your waistline," says Michele Olson, PhD, a professor of exercise science at Auburn University in Montgomery, Alabama, and a FITNESS advisory board member. "You're working the rectus abdominus, which is only one of four muscles in the abdominal wall. But it's the other three deeper muscles [internal obliques, external obliques, transverse abdominis] that give you a leaner look by helping you with your posture."

The Solution: Take a temporary break from your usual crunches and target your obliques and transverse abdominis with our waist-cinching express ab workout, "Firm, Flat Abs Fast!" Olson suggests trying these Pilates-based moves as well: (1) the plank (balance on floor on forearms and toes and hold for 30 seconds), (2) double-leg stretch (lie on your back, knees bent 90 degrees with feet in air and shins parallel to the floor, shoulders off the floor with arms loosely hugging knees; extend your legs and arms out in a wide V, then return to start), (3) the side plank (lie on the floor on your right side, propped up on right elbow, feet stacked; lift your hips up, using your left hand on floor in front of you for support. Hold for 5 counts, then lower. Do 10 reps; switch sides and repeat). Do 10 reps of each move, three or four times a week.

Mistake #7: You've Been Doing the Same Weight Circuit Since Forever

The reason it seems easy isn't because you're getting stronger and stronger. It's because your muscles, having adapted to the program, are utterly bored. "You need to continually challenge them," Bushman says. "Muscles improve only when they're doing something they're unaccustomed to."

The Solution: There are myriad ways to change things up. "Use the machines, free weights, resistance bands. You can manipulate the number of reps, amount of weight, length of rest periods between sets, number of sets, and the overall number of exercises," Bushman says. Try doing 12 to 15 reps of light weights one session, 8 to 10 reps of moderate weights the next, then 4 to 6 reps of heavy weights. "Ideally, you want to do something different every time you go to the weight room, or at least once every two weeks," Sforzo adds.

Mistake #8: You Only Do Yoga

While it's great for flexibility and helps improve strength, the typical yoga session is not going to incinerate calories. A recent study found that it takes 90 minutes of hatha yoga to burn 200 calories -- about the same as window-shopping or a casual stroll.

The Solution: If you're doing an hour of yoga five days a week, you need to shift three of those days to aerobic activity, says Kara Mohr, PhD, an exercise physiologist and founder of MohrResults.com, a fitness and nutrition consulting company. "I always encourage my clients to do yoga because it's excellent for raising the mind-body connection, which helps stop overeating," she adds. But you need to think of it as a supplemental activity if your goal is weight loss.

Mistake #9: You Always Run at a Steady Pace

If you want to increase your speed, you won't improve your time without interval training. "It teaches your muscles to burn energy more efficiently, so you can go faster," Porcari says. "You're also training your legs to move quicker and getting mentally used to the idea."

The Solution: Porcari recommends starting out with a one-mile warm-up, then doing four to six rounds of running at slightly faster than your regular pace for a quarter mile and slightly slower than your regular pace for a quarter mile. (If you're outside, try going from telephone pole to telephone pole.) "The goal is gradually to lengthen the faster-paced intervals and increase the tempo," Porcari explains. He adds that to prevent injuries, it's best to keep such speed work to once or twice a week.

Mistake #10: Your Workout Is the Sole Activity You Get
Sit all day and you’re missing out on burning an easy 900 extra calories. That’s the difference between what people who aren't sedentary melt in non-exercise activity during a day versus what couch potatoes burn, says James Levine, MD, PhD, an obesity expert at the Mayo Clinic and author of *Move a Little, Lose a Lot*. "Humans are basically built to be moving. The mechanisms that drive metabolism switch on when a person stands and they switch off as soon as she sits," Dr. Levine says.

**The Solution:** The more active you are, the better. At the very least, you should get up every hour and walk or march in place. One easy change Dr. Levine recommends: Pace the floor when you’re on the phone. Make it a habit and weight loss will be just several calls away!

*Originally published in FITNESS magazine, May 2009.*