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Your top
health
& fitness
questions
answered

BY **AMELIA RICCI** / PHOTOGRAPHY BY **GREG SCHWARK**

Whether you're a gym devotee or just starting a shape up plan, admit it, there are a handful of questions you've always wondered but have probably thought too basic or silly to even ask! Here at *Oxygen* we might just have the answer.

As a health and fitness coach with a strong interest in bikini competitions, I get asked a lot of fitness-related questions. I often get asked the same questions, so in this article, I give you the answers:

DOES MUSCLE TURN INTO FAT IF YOU DON'T USE IT?

Firstly, it's important to note that fat and muscle cells are completely different tissue. For the purposes of weight training we are interested in skeletal muscle. This is structured as a cylindrically shaped cell (long and stringy in appearance) and ranges from 30cm long (for example, in your thigh muscle or sartorius) to 1mm in length (attached to the tiny bones in the ear).

Fat cells (also referred to as adipose tissue) are quite different: they are designed to store fats and make fats. But fat cells do more than just store energy, they also insulate the body, and make hormones including leptin, which is involved in the regulation of appetite, and energy balance. It is interesting to note that deposits of fat around the belly are linked to insulin resistance, while fat on the limbs is more "harmless". In women, fat deposits in the hips, breasts and buttocks are somewhat controlled by female sex hormones.¹

One of the amazing things about muscle tissue is that it has the ability through regular, progressive exercise to increase in size (known as muscle hypertrophy). Donnelly and colleagues have reported that strength training studies (lasting from 8 to 52 weeks) have shown increases of 1 to 2kg of muscle mass. In addition to increasing in size, the muscle can also get stronger and, with additional training, improvements can be seen in endurance capacity, power output and force production.²

If you're not active your body composition can shift, where the muscles that you have worked hard to build get smaller. You still have the same number of muscle cells - but each muscle cell gets thinner. If you happen to keep eating the same amount of food, the fat cells (which were always there) will now expand. Under no circumstances does one type of cell (muscle) turn into a completely different type of cell (fat) with different internal machinery, functions and shape.¹

Applying this to our training goals (to increase muscle and lose body fat) it's

important to recognise that to grow lean muscle mass is not just one magic thing, rather it is the combination of several aspects including nutrition, training and mindset. Overall caloric expenditure is the way to uncover your muscle, so you can see its size and shape. Remember that the basics of fat loss are relatively simple: to lose body fat you need to burn more calories than you consume.

Finally, it's important to note that scale weight alone is not a good indicator of body composition. It's just one measure and can't tell you if you have lost fat, muscle or water. Other methods include the DEXA scan, Body Scan and callipers, however the least expensive is to take your own progress photos and combine these with waist measurements and use your scale weight as a measure over time and look at the trend or increase or decrease.

HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE TO GET VISIBLE ABS? I TRAIN MY ABS AND EAT WELL, BUT AM NOT SEEING PROGRESS.

It's important to look at all aspects of your body including hormone function. In particular, oestrogen levels can be to blame for a soft midsection. You can get your hormone levels tested by a doctor and if hormone balance is considered to be normal, then you can examine other factors.

In the answer above we learned that body fat is dictated by overall caloric intake. Therefore, the most important factor in body composition, and being able to see abdominal muscle definition, is to establish healthy eating habits. Everyone is different, and this is where it's important to observe how different foods make you feel and then exclude any foods that may irritate your stomach. You may do this by your own observation or see a dietician for hydrogen breath testing and other methods of food intolerance testing. Once you have found a nutrition regime that suits you, this is where you can establish consistency.

Abs are made in the kitchen and it depends on what your starting body fat level is. It can take 6-12 weeks to see visible abs and this relates to consistency. Nutrition is closely related to our mindset and for some people, moods can affect what and how we eat! If you are serious about a fat loss goal, firstly be honest with yourself about any



“Consistency and action are much more powerful than any specific diet or fitness program. Just keep your head down, don’t worry about what others are doing and keep going.”

extra treats (like alcohol or sweets) and look to reduce your calories slightly, plus ensure you are eating enough fibre, for example, green vegetables and drinking enough water.

Try this consistently for 2 weeks and reassess. Remember that abs are seen by reducing body fat on top of the midsection, you can “smash” them with training, but nutrition needs to be on point

I HAVE TRIED SO MANY DIFFERENT DIET AND TRAINING PROGRAMS, BUT NOTHING WORKS. WILL I EVER ACHIEVE MY FITNESS GOALS?

These days there are so many great resources for health and fitness enthusiasts. You may have fallen into the trap of focusing on information over implementation, which is where you might be so caught up in changing strategies instead of taking action. Along with the benefits that come with accessibility to the internet, there can be downsides, unless we start consistently applying the knowledge, we’re never going to get anywhere.

You don’t need anyone else to give you the answers. Just start - start taking action today, right now and just stay the course. It seems like your problem might be caused by the fact that you keep changing things and don’t give yourself a chance for consistency.

It will take time for your body to adjust to a new nutrition plan so be patient and don’t

keep changing things after you don't see results in a week. If you've been struggling with yo-yo dieting over the years, most likely your metabolism is going to take a little while to sort itself out. I've gone periods, especially when I had to lose the baby weight, where weight didn't move for weeks, but I kept going and eventually things started to happen!

Consistency and action are much more powerful than any specific diet or fitness program. Just keep your head down, don't worry about what others are doing and keep going.

I STRUGGLE WITH A POSITIVE MINDSET AND SEEM TO ALWAYS DOUBT MYSELF. HOW CAN I TURN THIS AROUND?

If you struggle with self-doubt, truly, deeply believing in yourself takes time and takes work. You must change the way you talk to yourself. You have to let go of limitations that you've held on to, limitations that protected you from having to try or put yourself out there. Self-doubt can hold you back in so many ways. You might be too afraid to try new things or fully experience life due to fears and reservations about what you're capable of. These mental limitations prevent us from reaching our potential.

Try not to carry all your past struggles with you as you move forward on your journey either. Your past choices do not determine the choices you will make today or tomorrow. Don't doubt yourself. Start fresh. Stop quitting and talking yourself out of living life to the fullest. No matter how many times you've failed in the past, a totally different outcome is possible for you, starting right this moment. Every week, every day and every minute you have the opportunity for a fresh start.

Your level of success with a fitness and body transformation program is going to be heavily affected by your own self-perception. If you don't believe in yourself, it negatively affects everything you do and can prevent you from ever being successful with permanent fat loss.

Practise a positive way of thinking and speaking to yourself. It may take time so be prepared to practise it over and over and over. Be kind to yourself. Use affirmations. Read positive thinking books. Repeat. Over and over and over until it starts to sink in. You are stronger than you think and absolutely capable of achieving anything you set out to.

I AM REALLY "GOOD" DURING THE WEEK BUT TEND TO BINGE ON WEEKENDS. HOW CAN I CONTROL MYSELF DURING MY CHEAT MEAL?

Firstly, it is the "cheat" mentality that needs to be replaced with an understanding that foods have a calorie and macro content and should not be labelled good or bad. The first step is acknowledging that food should not be viewed as bad or something associated with guilt.

All foods are fine in moderation and you will find that the longer you stick with clean eating the less you crave foods high in salt, sugar or saturated fat. When eating out it's so important to have your favourite food and enjoy it. By mentally and physically enjoying food and not feeling guilty you will learn that everything in life is about balance and clean eating is no different. Try to avoid an all-or-nothing mindset. For example, you eat some chocolate and all of a sudden it's 3 days later and you've been off the rails ever since. You must give up on black-and-white thinking when it comes to weight loss.

It's like dropping your phone then just smashing it entirely, or getting a flat tyre then replacing all 4 instead of just fixing the flat. Maybe you go out for dinner Friday night, go a little overboard and instead of getting back to healthy eating on Saturday morning, you decide to go off the rails all weekend and start again Monday because, in your mind, you've already ruined everything. Can you see how this kind of thinking will completely halt your progress? This journey is never going to be perfect, there is no such thing.

Instead of beating yourself up, you could just truly enjoy the Friday night meal then continue your healthy habits for the rest of the weekend, helping to create some balance instead. That one meal isn't going to have a big effect on your results if you just move on. By giving up the mentality that one meal or one day is going to ruin all our hard work is how we can ultimately find balance and make room to enjoy our favourite meals and treats on occasion. By learning how to incorporate these treats into our lifestyles without using them as an excuse to blow off our healthy habits for days on end, we can maintain balance long-term, while still working towards our goals and enjoying all that life has to offer.



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