

Weight loss programme or exercise? Both, says study

Researchers have compared a weight loss programme with gym membership to determine which conferred the best results.

The answer is that both have pros and cons and that a combination of the two produces the best results.

The Missouri University study examined real-life experiences to determine which programme helps people lose kilograms, reduce body fat and gain health benefits.

Participants included those who attended the weight watchers programme for 12 weeks and those who exercised in a gym.

The weight watchers lost an average of five percent of their body weight, but Steve Ball, assistant professor of exercise physiology, found that a large percentage of the lost weight was lean tissue and not fat.

The fitness centre group lost very little weight, but they probably improved their health because they lost a significant amount of intra-abdominal fat (fat around vital organs).

"(The weight watchers') body fat percentage did not improve at all because they lost a much higher percentage than expected of lean tissue," said Ball.

"It is advantageous to keep lean tissue because it is correlated with higher metabolism. Losing lean tissue often slows metabolism. What your body is made of is more important than what you weigh."

The majority of other weight watcher studies had not considered body fat percentage change and only focussed on body weight.

"This is one aspect of our study that makes it unique," Ball said. "We used a sophisticated measure of body composition - the Bod Pod - to look at what type of weight was lost: lean or fat."

In addition, Ball said the study was novel because CT scans were used to investigate changes in abdominal fat, which is more predictive of cardiovascular disease.

These results imply that exercise may have positive influence on the metabolic syndrome despite the number on the scale, Ball concluded.

Ball also found that group support is very important. Most of the weight watchers participants stuck with the programme during the duration of the study, while many of the fitness centre participants quit.

"These results imply that overweight, sedentary women joining a fitness centre with the intent of weight loss or body fat change will likely fail without support and without altering their diets," Ball said.

"Nearly 50 percent of people who start an exercise programme will quit within six months."

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