

EXPERT OPINION: Food and fitness, with Paul Arciero

A bowl of ice cream can always be “burned off” by running on the treadmill, right?

Actually, for weight loss, nutrition trumps exercise all the time. I find it perplexing that some experts seemed surprised when *Time* magazine and others reported this last summer, because the numbers have always been clear: It takes a *lot* of exercise to utilize the calories we can get in one big meal or dessert. Recently our lab showed profound results from dietary changes alone with no added exercise. When our subjects divided their caloric intake into six rather than three meals a day, and increased the percentage of their calories that came from protein, they saw significant weight loss. Perhaps most intriguing, our body-composition analysis revealed that muscle mass was maintained even though overall weight decreased. Much of what was lost was abdominal fat, which is linked so strongly with cardiac and other health problems.

Then why bother to exercise?

There’s extensive and dramatic evidence that exercise confers tremendous physiological and mental-health benefits. In fact, in the several studies that I’ve had published, combining healthy eating with resistance and aerobic exercise was better than diet or exercise alone. At the American College of Sports Medicine, I presented findings from our study of pulse yoga and a six-meal, increased-protein diet. Pulse yoga captures the wonderful benefits of yoga and adds resistance exercise by including micro-movements, with small weights, during the yoga poses. The combination is great for women who want to fight osteoporosis, or for men who find conventional yoga too passive or “feminine.” (The fast-growing practice of pulse yoga was co-developed by Argie Tang, the wife of Oscar Tang, a Skidmore trustee emeritus. I got certified as a teacher of her yoga for athletes in 2005.)

In our research with women engaged in pulse yoga or functional resistance training, they all lost body fat, especially in the ab-

domen, kept good muscle mass, and improved their aerobic efficiency about equally. The yoga practitioners reduced their blood sugar even more than the resistance trainers.



And both groups reported improved mood, with more energy and vigor. At the end of the 10 weeks, many actually wanted to continue—that’s a really good sign!

Are the computerized exercise games any good?

We think so. We’re now studying elderly people using stationary bikes with and without a video component. The cybercyclists have a simulated 3-D view of scenery, obstacles in the road, and landmarks. The others can watch TV or read while they pedal. So far, both groups show better body composition and muscle strength and so on, but the really neat outcome is that the videogamers have bigger improvements in cognitive functions like memory and problem-solving. “Navigating” the video course—if you don’t react to the scene, it will “crash” your bike—seems to be challenging and sharpening the cybercyclists’ minds.

Bottom line: Rely more on nutritional changes to lose weight and more on exercise to improve a range of body functions.

Paul Arciero, a faculty member in health and exercise sciences, has taught yoga and pulse yoga to thousands, including Skidmore employees and varsity athletes.

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