

# **Strength Training For Women: Put The Curves Back Where They Belong**

by Mitchell Yass, PT

In my twelve-year career as a physical therapist and personal trainer, I am still amazed about the lack of understanding women have regarding strength training. Women are still not aware that strength training builds muscles that result in a subsequent increase in metabolic rate. This causes the body to increase its fat burning to create the energy necessary for the increased metabolic rate. This is the missing component to every diet regiment. Without this, dieting alone will not work. Then there are the fears that if I do work out, I am going to get big and muscular like a man. This couldn't be farther from the truth. Women are not aware that strength training can build bone density. It is not necessary for postmenopausal women to take hormone replacement therapy to prevent hip fractures and other bone abnormalities. Strength training affects every part of the body besides the muscular system including the cardiovascular system, pulmonary system, gastrointestinal system, immune system and even affects your brain chemistry.

Then there is the misinformation. 1. If you use a certain device or piece of machinery, you can lose the fat in a certain area of your body. I am sorry to break this to you, but there is no such thing as spot losing fat. 2. If you do decide to lift weights, you should keep the amount of weight low and do more repetitions. This is how you 'sculpt' a woman's body. Well ladies, there is no such thing as sculpting. You strengthen muscles and then grow and get bigger. If you want to see more definition, make your muscles bigger and then lose fat and you will maximize your definition. 3. For you to reach your goals, you will need to spend hours a day at a gym. 4. I am too old to start strength training.

My biggest concern is that women are not lifting weights for one or more of the reasons listed above. My goal in this article is to shed light on every issue I have identified and hopefully inspire a few women to take the plunge and see that strength training is not just for the boys.

If your concern is weight loss, strength training must be included in your plan or your plan is destined for failure. Excessive fat is nothing more than stored energy. The body is storing this energy because you are taking in too many calories in comparison to the amount of calories you are burning. It is that simple. The majority of the country seems to think that the answer is to reduce your caloric intake until you are taking in less calories than you are burning. The problem with this theory is that if you reduce your caloric intake too much, your body might think you are starving and reduce your metabolic rate to match the reduced caloric intake. Metabolic rate is the speed at which you burn calories to sustain life. That is the amount of calories necessary for you to breathe, move blood throughout the body, digest food and move it to all your cells, prevent illness and so on. You may get an initial decrease in weight, but you will shortly plateau as your metabolic rate decreases. Eventually, you start to go back to a higher level of caloric intake but your body prevents your metabolic rate from rising. Now you have a surplus of calories and you start storing them as fat again. The better solution is to raise your metabolic rate. Cause the body to burn more calories every second of every day you are alive. This will allow you to ingest a reasonable amount of calories without worrying about storing excess calories as fat. The way to accomplish this is strength training. Strength training causes muscles to grow. As muscles grow they get bigger. The larger muscle mass requires more oxygen and energy to keep it alive. As a result, the body has to work harder to provide this additional oxygen and energy. The source for this energy is your stored fat. Fat is the energy source for metabolism. There is no trick here. You are simply forcing your body to burn more calories every second of every day. Using treadmills or other forms of aerobic activity only increase your metabolism for the period of time you perform the activity. Combine strength training with a proper diet of the appropriate carbohydrates, fats and proteins and you have a guaranteed method of controlling fat.

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As for the fears that once you start weight training, you are going to look like a man, this is ridiculous. Muscle mass is a trait controlled by the hormonal systems of the body. Muscle mass is a characteristic under the control of sex hormones. As a result, large amounts of testosterone will produce large amounts of muscle mass. Due to the limited amount of testosterone in women, you can't develop man size amounts of muscle. The best you can do increase the amount of muscle mass you have. The fear of getting man sized is mostly associated with woman professional body builders. These women are taking synthesized testosterone steroids. In a blood test, they would appear to be more of a man than I am because of the severely high testosterone content in their blood.

Strength training will increase bone density. This is a good thing for all people in terms of limiting bone fractures but most important for postmenopausal women. Strength training causes muscles to grow and increase the contractile force on the bones they are attach to. As a result, a signal is sent to the brain to bring more calcium and the other components of bone to the area being stress. Bone density is increased directly related to the amount of force put on the bone. The body would not allow a stress to occur to it without performing some corrective action. The nice part about strength training is that it creates a controlled stress on the body versus ballistic forms of activity. This means the body can sense the stress and react appropriately.

There is a terrible misnomer that strength training is simply for the muscular system and that other forms of training must be performed to exercise the other systems of the body, especially the cardiovascular system. Strength training is cardiovascular training as well. When a muscle contracts, it develops lactic acid. This causes the PH of the blood to become more acidic. The body recognizes this and causes increased circulation to the area to help deliver the lactic acid to the liver so it can be changed to pyruvic acid, which can be used in generating energy. Having more muscle as stated above forces the body to produce and deliver more oxygen and energy to this new tissue. The cardiovascular system is the means by which the body transmits these essential nutrients. The ability of blood to flow through veins back to the heart especially in the legs is strongly dependent on the contractile force of the surrounding musculature. Stronger muscles mean increased venous pressure speeding up the flow of blood through the veins and limiting the chances of varicose veins developing. When performing high intensity exercise such as strength training, the heart rate is increased fairly sharply for short periods of time. The body conditions itself by learning to return to your resting heart rate in the shortest period of time. When performing aerobic activity, your heart rate is raised to a much lesser degree for a sustained period of time. The short-term challenge to the cardiovascular system is not as great therefore the body's reaction to the activity is not as large. The conditioning process is less focused on responding to higher intensity shorter duration activities versus longer duration and lesser intense activities. Most activities in life are high intensity short duration therefore the cardiovascular conditioning associated with strength training is more functional than conventional aerobic training.

Individuals preying on women's concerns about their hips, thighs and abdominal regions have sold the idea of spot losing fat. The unfortunate fact is that no machine or device can cause spot fat loss. Fat is burned, as the body requires it. Where you store your fat is completely dependent on the individual. The important thing to recognize is that as you increase your strength and increase your muscle mass, your body will pull fat from the areas you are concerned about. A common technique I have seen implemented to spot lose is wearing different forms of garments to create increased sweating in an area. This will only cause the body to deplete

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Continued:

water for a short period before it recognizes the loss and causes you to retain more water to correct the imbalance. These garments never even address the fat stores in the area in question. Another issue about weight loss should be brought up now. The idea that you have to be sweating profusely and be out of breath when performing exercise is false. Sweating is not a factor in burning fat. I rarely ever sweat when weight lifting yet I have controlled my fat stores as have the clients I work with.

The idea that a woman should not use heavy resistance to build muscle is patronizing to women. My wife is the best example of what a woman should look like and how she should lift weights. She is beautiful, sexy and feminine, needless to say, but carries enough muscle mass on her body to perform any activity she wants and never questions whether performing that activity is going to hurt herself. She lifts weights the equivalent of many men in our physical therapy and personal training office but still looks great in a bikini. I have women in their sixties, seventies and eighties lifting weights most people would say they could never lift. They simply started low and have progressively increased the weight. They learned that the stronger they are, the more they are able to perform activities with ease and limit the chance of injury. "Strength equals function". As for how much time is necessary to strength train, it is far less than most people think. Each body part only has to be exercised once a week to develop strength and muscle mass. The average person comes to our office twice a week for an hour to hour and one half hours to achieve a full bodywork out.

I hope this article enlightens you about a lot of the misinformation regarding strength training for women. Strength training is a safe, effective means to achieving a healthy lifestyle for everybody. Don't be afraid to begin now. It doesn't matter how old you are or what your fitness level is. Strength training can change your life; it changed mine.

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