



Basic Health Info

Busting Weight Loss Plateaus

By Chet Zelasko, PhD

Weight loss requires that you eat less and exercise more. You can lose weight without exercising, but you'll lose muscle mass as well as fat. That's not really desirable because muscle tissue is metabolically more active than fat tissue. In effect, you'll have to eat even fewer calories to lose weight.

While you may not like it, you have to move more to eat more. It's even more important when you reach a plateau while losing weight—and everyone reaches a plateau at some point. This Health Info will explain how you can bust the plateau without cutting your calories.

The Role of Exercise in Weight Loss

Very simply put, exercise uses calories. The more calories you use exercising, the more you can eat and still lose weight. But exercise by itself is not an effective way to lose weight. There are at least two reasons for this phenomenon.

First, we can't possibly exercise enough to burn a sufficient amount of calories and live the lives most of us live with work, family, and volunteer activities. Exercise at a moderate level uses about 10 calories per minute. Even walking for 30 minutes only uses about 300 calories, and less if we exercise at a low level. That still leaves 23.5 hours left in the day that you won't be using excess calories. As an aside, that's why it's important to be more active the rest of the day. Park farther from the office, take the steps instead of the escalator, anything to move your body that uses calories.

Second, and most disconcerting, is that we adapt quickly. That means our body learns to be efficient. As we continue to exercise regularly, our body learns to use the least number of muscle fibers to do the same job and to use less energy doing it. That means that the number of calories used per workout decreases. The exercise is good for our cardiovascular health and for the body overall, but it just won't burn the same number of calories as it used to—and so we plateau. What can we do about it?



Busting Plateaus

There are two ways a person can bust a weight loss plateau via exercise.

Longer Workouts

There's no question that spending more time exercising uses more calories. In fact, one popular method is to exercise longer and slower to burn more fat. How does that work?

When you exercise, your body would rather burn sugar (glucose) than anything else because it can maximize the energy it gets from that source. Fat and, to a limited extent, protein can also provide energy but not as efficiently. When you're sitting comfortably in a chair, you're using a little more fat than carbohydrate unless you ate something within the past hour. When you rise and start walking, you shift to burning a higher percentage of carbohydrates. Moving from a walk to a jog to a run to an all-out sprint will continue to shift the carbohydrate percentage higher until you are using carbohydrates exclusively. The theory behind fat-burning exercise is to workout at a low level to burn more fat. While it works, the problem is that you have to invest more time, something we hold as a premium, to get to the fat burning stage (1). It's just not an acceptable solution for the lives most of us lead.

While reducing the intensity of exercise to burn fat isn't necessarily efficient in terms of burning calories, it does help you to train your body to burn fat as a fuel. That's the outcome we would really like. Just like any type of exercise training, there are changes that occur within muscle and other organs that help use stored fat as fuel. Over time, relying on fat as a fuel may help with fat loss.

Harder Workouts

The second way to bust a plateau is to increase the intensity of exercise for one or two workouts a week. There are two ways to increase intensity: increase the speed or rate at which you exercise and/or increase the grade or resistance of the exercise. For example, if you walk for exercise, you can walk faster or you can walk up a hill. If you're using an exercise bike, you can increase the revolutions per minute or increase the resistance setting of the bike. The same principle can be applied to any mode of exercise: faster and/or harder.



The key is doing this in a systematic way. That's called interval training or IT for short. IT utilizes short bursts of high intensity work mixed with normal pace. The length of the interval is dependent on your fitness level but usually varies from 30 seconds to two minutes. For beginners, the interval can be as simple as walking up two flights of stairs every third minute of your walk. For those who are fitter, it may be one minute of jogging every third minute of your walk. If you use an exercise bike, you can increase the revolutions per minute from 60-70 rpm to 90-100 rpm for 30 seconds every third minute. Keep the total minutes you workout the same whether it's 30 or 45 minutes. Just add the intervals regularly throughout the workout.

IT accomplishes several things. It induces muscle damage that takes energy to repair; that sounds bad, but fixing muscle damage increases metabolism and you use more calories. IT also makes you fitter because you're challenging your cardiovascular system more than a typical walk or jog. Remember, only use the IT workout once or twice a week. Too much of a good thing can end up leaving you without enough time to recover.

The Bottom Line

When you hit that weight loss plateau, don't despair. The solution lies in pumping up the intensity to get you off that plateau and losing weight again! In short, take the hills instead of the plains as you stride toward your better life.

For a complete program to help you train to use fat as a fuel and fat-burning workouts, check out The Optimal Performance Program in the Store at DrChet.com.

Reference

Zelasko, C. J. Exercise for weight loss: What are the facts? (1995). Journal of the American Dietetic Association. 95:1414-1417.

Dr. Chet Zelasko is dedicated to helping men and women get healthy and fit. As a health and fitness consultant with a PhD in Exercise Physiology and Health Education from Michigan State University, he provides health information based on the most recent research and delivers it in a way that's easy to understand. Whether in person during seminars, in audio recordings, or in the written word, he makes sense out of the health news people hear so they can make better health choices and achieve optimal health. He's conducted research and been published in peer-reviewed journals. He is certified by the American College of Sports Medicine as a Health and Fitness Specialist and has taught in ACSM certification workshops throughout the United States; he also belongs to the American Society of Nutrition. Although Grand Rapids, Michigan, is home, he has presented seminars on health to groups all over North America, Mexico, and the Caribbean and has written extensively on the health benefits of a good diet, regular exercise, and targeted supplementation.

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