

Trying To Lose Weight?

This Is The Weekly Cardio And Strength Training Split That Works Best

New research shows how much cardio fits into a weight loss plan. Weight loss can seem like it comes with a list of dos and don'ts, making it overwhelming. Cardio is a particularly hot topic amongst weight loss experts, and if we're being honest, the constant whiplash of "yes, you must do cardio to lose weight!" and "no, cardio isn't meaningful for fat reduction!" is confusing.

Before getting into the weeds of what cardio can and can't do when it comes to weight loss goals, it's important to know the role that different types of exercise play in losing weight. **"Cardio specifically contributes to weight loss by increasing total daily energy expenditure, which helps create the caloric deficit needed for weight loss,"** says Rachelle Reed, PhD, ACSM-EP, an exercise physiologist based in Athens, Georgia.

Resistance training also plays an (arguably even more important) role, albeit a different one. **"Strength training also raises energy expenditure during the workout session, but its bigger contribution is the preservation or gain of lean muscle mass, which supports a higher resting metabolic rate over time (the speed at which your body burns calories),"** she explains. (More on this later.) Given this intel, it's clear there are multiple movement modalities that factor into **your ability to reduce fat** (along with a whole host of other health benefits). But in an effort to clear the air once and for all, we tapped experts and looked at the most up-to-date research to clarify exactly how cardio impacts weight loss goals. **Meet the experts:** Disha Narang, MD, is an endocrinologist and director of obesity medicine at Endeavor Health. Rachelle Reed, PhD, ACSM-EP, is an exercise physiologist in Athens, Georgia.

What The Latest Research Says About Cardio And Weight Loss

Cardio can play an important role in weight loss, but it's only one piece of a much larger puzzle, says Disha Narang, MD, an endocrinologist and director of obesity medicine at Endeavor Health. On its own, cardio increases total daily energy expenditure, which helps create the **calorie deficit** needed for weight loss (consuming fewer calories than your body requires to stay at its current weight).

However, the biggest and most sustainable changes tend to occur when cardio is combined with strength training and a balanced, calorie-appropriate diet. “Cardio burns calories in the moment, but strength training changes your body’s baseline metabolism by preserving or building muscle, which increases calorie burn even at rest,” Dr. Narang explains.

To get more into the nitty gritty, a 2024 meta-analysis in *Jama Network* included 116 randomized clinical trials with 6,880 adults who were overweight or had obesity to explore the relationship between aerobic exercise and its effects on body weight, waist circumference, and fat measures. After eight weeks, researchers found that at least 150 minutes of weekly aerobic exercise was associated with “clinically important” reductions in waist circumference and body fat, though increasing to 300 minutes per week correlated with greater reductions in body weight, waist size, and fat metrics. (The impact of resistance training wasn’t explored in this particular analysis, but again, muscle-building activity *and* cardio both matter for maximum weight loss success.)

What type of cardio is best for weight loss?

As for the “best” type of cardio, it’s important to understand there isn’t a one-size-fits-all approach. “The ‘best’ type of cardio is the form of movement a person enjoys, can repeat multiple times per week, and can progressively build over time,” Reed says. “For instance, steady-state cardio is often easier to sustain and recover from, walking is the most accessible and often promotes the greatest weekly volume, and HIIT can be time-efficient, but isn’t tolerated well or enjoyed by everyone,” she explains.

Instead of dwelling on what type of cardio you’re doing, Dr. Narang says you’re better off finding a modality you actually enjoy (and will stick with) and pairing it with a balanced diet. “Nutrition is the biggest driver of weight change, and a structured, protein-forward diet with limited processed food outperforms exercise alone for fat loss and preservation of lean mass,” she says. Research supports this: a recent 2025 meta-analysis of 97 studies published in *Nutrition Reviews* concluded that dietary interventions combined with high-intensity

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aerobic exercise, particularly cycling, was crucial in mitigating metabolic risk in overweight or obese individuals.

With all that in mind, it is possible to overdo cardio—whether your goal is weight loss or something else. “Excessive cardio could indirectly hinder weight-loss efforts because it can reduce training quality, elevate stress load, and increase the likelihood of injury, which reduces overall physical activity and the energy expenditure that comes from it,” Reed says.

Plus, without adequate recovery, high volumes of endurance exercise can lead to overtraining syndrome, ultimately impairing performance, increasing fatigue, altering mood, and disrupting hormonal balance, according to 2022 research published in *Frontiers*. “When it comes to cardio for weight loss the priority is striking a balance where there’s enough intensity to challenge the system and stimulate adaptation, but not so much that it undermines recovery, strength training quality, or long-term consistency,” Reed says.

It’s also important to not let too much cardio crowd out resistance training, since muscle is metabolically active tissue, and losing it through cardio-only programs can slow progress over time, Dr. Narang says. “Strength training keeps your metabolism resilient and makes long-term weight maintenance more achievable,” she adds.

How Exactly To Incorporate Cardio If You're Trying To Lose Weight

Generally speaking, the American College of Sports Medicine recommends that adults get at least 150 to 300 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic activity (like cycling, dancing, or brisk walking) or 75 to 150 minutes of vigorous-intensity aerobic activity (like running, tennis, or intense yard work) per week. However, the best way to incorporate cardio for weight loss is to treat it as one part of a holistic routine, so you should also include strength training two to three times a week to preserve lean muscle mass, which burns more calories at rest, Reed says.

“Someone starting out should think of cardio as their ‘energy burn’ tool and strength training as their ‘metabolic investment,’” Dr. Narang says. “A combination works best, so aim for two to three days of resistance training for muscle health and three days of cardio to improve endurance and support the overall calorie deficit.”

For weight loss goals, Dr. Narang suggests doing the following each week:

3 cardio sessions: 30-60 minutes each; mix of steady-state cardio and intervals

2-3 strength training sessions: 30-45 minutes each; **full-body exercises** (aim for six to eight exercises for two to three sets at 8-12 reps each)

1 active recovery day: 45-60 minutes of gentle movement such as walking, yoga, or mobility work

What cardio exercises burn the most calories?

At its core, successful weight loss requires a calorie deficit, which can be achieved in one of three ways: reducing calorie intake, increasing calorie expenditure via exercise, or a combination of both. Here's a cheat-sheet of the best calorie-burning exercises to help you optimize your time and effort, according to the **American Council on Exercise**. (FYI: the range of calories burned used for this list is estimated for a 125 to 185 pound person)

Jumping rope: 667–990 calories burned/hour (at 120 skips per minute)

Running sprints: 639–946 calories burned/hour

Kickboxing: 582–864 calories burned/hour

Indoor cycling: 568–841 calories burned/hour

Running: 566–839 calories burned/hour (10-minute mile pace)

Kettlebell circuits: 554–822 calories burned/hour

Rowing: 481–713 calories burned/hour (150 watts, which can be checked on the machine)

Stair climbing : 452–670 calories burned/hour (77 steps per minute)

What This Means For You

If weight loss is a priority, cardio can be a tool in moving the needle when consistently paired alongside strength training and intentional nutrition (think: a diet rich in whole, fresh foods and limited in overly-processed foods and snacks), Reed says. In other words, cardio is not necessarily the most efficient way to lose weight when done in isolation but fitting it into a holistic routine is how you unlock the blueprint for success.

And even if fat loss isn't your goal, Dr. Narang says it's still worth incorporating heart-pumping activities throughout your week to support cardiovascular fitness, improve cholesterol and blood pressure levels, promote cognitive function, and decrease the risk of chronic disease. After all, feeling good both physically and mentally will encourage you to take care of your body and stick to your goals — whether that involves weight loss or not.

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