

Handout

A Culture Obsessed With Fat

by Connie Jasinskis, B.Ed., MSc., CALA Master Trainer
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As a culture our obsession with fat - that is, with women feeling they are too fat - began raising its skinny head in the sixties, when Twiggy slinked onto the scene. Before that, "voluptuous" was the body ideal, except possibly in the twenties, when a more linear, emancipated silhouette prevailed. How many of us have wished we lived in an earlier time when a "Curvaceous" figure was regarded as beautiful? History has seen women strap themselves into corsets, which restricted breathing, altered the shape of the rib cage, and aborted pregnancies. However, even in those confining corsets, women were expected to have curves - breasts, hips - body fat!



The things we do to ourselves in the name of fashion range from ludicrous to downright dangerous. It is estimated that 10% of high school and college students have eating disorders. In a South Carolina study, 40% of fifth graders felt they were too fat (only 20% were), and a U.S. study found that 60% of fourth-grade girls were on diets (reported in Life, February, 1995). When discussing body fat, one must keep a very clear head, and assess whether the goals for fat loss are cosmetic, or health conscious. Over 50% of women believe themselves to be overweight, when the vast majority of them fall into healthy (BMI) weight range. On the other hand, many men who should be concerned with how their body fat is affecting their health, are not.

New research on a "fat gene" has captured public attention lately. Those of us who hunger to be thinner are waiting (not very patiently) for some form of injection or pill which will reverse our faulty genetics and make us thin and beautiful. (Ever notice how the words "thin" and "beautiful" seem to fit together so well, while "fat" and "beautiful" don't co-exist at all in our vocabulary?) The fact is genetics has played a role in selecting those individuals who could store fat well and thus survive times of famine. However, inhabitants of the industrialized nations now live in times of permanent "feast". Individuals who store fat will suffer serious health risks - from increased incidence of various cancers to digestive and circulatory disease.



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The over-abundance of high fat foods in our society is not the only problem. It is fair to say the only exercise some people get is leaning out the car window so they can be heard on the drive-through intercom at the fast food restaurant. The number of labour saving devices we live with is staggering. We have appliances to rock our babies, chop food, carry us up stairs or hills, and turn on our lights with a clap of the hands. Our children are more likely to suffer radiation poisoning from their proximity to TV or computer screen than they are to experience the scrapes and bruises of our parents' active childhood.

The fact is, though there may be a genetic component to obesity, and some of us may have a "set point" for a body shape which will not put us on the pages of "Vogue", we do have the ability to determine our "fat-fate". There is no magic here--no expensive surgery or fantastic, fat melting formulas. Our bodies will each respond differently, but all bodies, all shapes and sizes will respond. The goal is a healthy diet (with less than 30% of calories from fat), and healthy, active living.

The average consumer has to get a few facts straight before evaluating whether they have too much, too little, or just the right amount of body fat. First, they need to understand that their "weight" is a number, which indicates the pull of gravity on the body. It does not indicate body composition - the relative contribution to the body weight of: bone, muscle, fat, fluids, vital organs, and connective tissues. Therefore, stepping on the scales to see whether you're too fat, is a useless exercise - unless you step on the scales, then off, then on, then off...keep going....then change the arms in 4, in 3, in 2....(you get the picture). Using your scale as a free weight is also recommended as a healthy exercise, particularly if you work out near an open window. (tee hee)

Assessment of percent body fat (the amount of your total weight which is composed of fat) can be done in a number of ways. A competent fitness assessor will be able to give a fairly accurate estimation of body fat percentage. However, consistency is even more important than accuracy in fat measurement techniques, because the greatest value in these tests is the comparison of results over time. Clients can do simple "pinch an inch" or girth measurement tests on themselves, and as long as they are consistent, the results can be relevant and useful.

Fat has an important role in the body to insulate against the cold, provide energy for muscular work, cushion bones and vital organs, form cell membranes, and



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carry fat-soluble vitamins. It's obvious that we need some fat on our bodies, but how much? Opinions about ideal percentages of body fat vary, but for women, 10% or less is generally regarded as too low; 31% or more, too high, with the ideal for the average person at around 25%. The ranges for men are 5% to 25%, with the ideal around 15%. Unless you have a distorted body image, your "ideal" body fat is probably where you look and feel your best.

Here's important news: It used to be thought that our body fat increased and we experienced a decline in aerobic fitness and strength because of aging. Now study after study is showing that increased body fat and decreased fitness are the result of a less active lifestyle. Inactivity causes many of the bodily changes associated with aging. We age because we slow down, not the other way around. Keeping body fat within ideal ranges, and maintaining aerobic and strength building activities on a regular basis (3-5 times/week) are the true "fountain of youth". This simple prescription reduces the risk of diabetes, high blood pressure, stroke, heart disease, stress and some kinds of cancer. It also greatly adds to the quality of life.

The guidelines for a healthy, active lifestyle are well known, but there is still a great deal of mythology around the topic of "fat". Some still believe that when you work out, you change fat to muscle. That is like saying that with enough training, your cat will become a dog. Fat and muscle are different tissues.

Using your muscles makes them larger and stronger. Exercising burns extra calories (fat). If you stop exercising, your muscles will shrink in size and strength, and you are likely to store the excess calories you eat as fat.

It is unfortunate, but specific fat deposits cannot be exercised away - a million curl-ups will not target and remove the fat covering your abdominal muscles. To reduce fat deposits, you have to reduce total body fat by burning more calories than you eat on a long-term basis. The recommended activities for this include any movement, which will utilize the large muscle groups of the body, and will elevate heart rate and breathing. The activity should continue for at least 15 to 20 minutes, (although this time is under scrutiny by fitness professionals) in order to achieve the desired calorie-burning effect.

Here is where more mythology prevails. Since fat is the fuel source for work in the lower half of the target heart rate zone, participants have been lead to believe that the best way to burn the most fat in a workout is to stay in the low end of the



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zone--"fat burner" heaven, the truth is, it doesn't matter what your fuel source is during your workout. Your fat stores are used to pay back any carbohydrate consumed by your muscles during a more high-intensity workout. What matters is the total number of calories burned. The harder you work, the more you work, the more often you work, the more calories (and ultimately - fat) your body will burn. Also, a lean body will burn more calories at rest as well as during activity than a body high in fat.

Of course, the workout must be safe, comfortable, and enjoyable, or the client (no matter how determined) will eventually find an injury or some other excuse not to return. There are many factors besides cost or convenience, which will deter the participant with excess body fat from participation. These include: over-heating, joint stress (from impact of sudden direction changes), lack of co-ordination and balance, low self-esteem or discomfort with one's body size or shape. When it comes to waging war against unwanted fat, the best strategy is to create a true love of activity.

Here's where aquafitness comes in. It's comfortable, enjoyable, and far safer than land classes (especially for someone with excess body fat) because of the impact-free environment. The body, which is over-fat and under-fit, will find this protective place to be cool and buoyant. Movement against the water provides resistance training, which is both sensual and effective. Aquatic movement is often slower and more fluid than similar movements executed in land classes a great advantage to the inexperienced, over-sized, or uncoordinated participant. Body size and shape are much less visible in the water; a factor which provides emotional protection for the participant. The resistance of the water can be used to build lean body mass in a way that is more comfortable and far less intimidating than the weight room. ("Tired of pumping iron, pump water instead in the "Liquid Weight Room". The pool" ...Guelph CALA Basics '94 group theme class description.

Aquatic exercise is a beneficial training ground for others besides the unfit or over-fat. Many athletes are discovering the advantages of water jogging or aquatic resistance training, which can be both exhausting and pain-free. Those who doubt the effectiveness of water as a training tool should try to maintain two to three minutes of vigorous running on the spot in deep or shallow water. Even without the addition of appliances to increase surface area and resistance, such activity can take heart rate and breathing to their upper limits. Joint stress is



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reduced or eliminated, and the water cools the body much more effectively than does evaporation on land.

So there you have some of the fat facts. In addition to supplying accurate information, it is important to set a positive climate for learning. Make the aquafitness class a place where all shapes and sizes will feel welcome. Be careful to choose cues and fit tips which highlight healthy attitude towards body fat and body image. Encourage the pursuit of healthy eating and joyful activity, rather than restrictive diets and punishing workouts. Instead of feeling imprisoned by the demands of fashion and society, feel empowered by healthy lifestyle choices.

The CALA quarterly newsletter, "Wavelink" includes handouts for aquafitness participants. These handouts will enhance your awareness about water exercise.

