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Why Exercise Won't Make You Thin

Did this headline get your attention? It certainly got mine when it ran as the cover story for *Time* magazine last week. While the author did make some valid points, the overall message was confusing and was certainly not a well-rounded representation of current science. In response, I would like to clarify the relationship between exercise and weight, and to address the relevance of the question: *Does Exercise Make Us Gain Weight?*

Before I get started, however, I would like to make one quick point: this article will be speaking about *physical activity*, not *exercise*. What's the difference? Exercise has too often become a bad word—a chore that conjures up images of spandex, headphones, and strange machines that sell for 5 easy payments of \$19.95 (but wait, there's more!). Physical activity can be much more open, describing anything from yard work and gardening to going for a walk, or riding your bicycle to work (a personal favorite).

While there is no questioning its benefits, physical activity can, and often does cause weight gain. I know this is not what you wanted to hear, but increasing your activity level triggers many changes within your body. These changes, such as storing more energy (and water) in your muscles, building muscles, tendons, and ligaments, and increasing blood volume are meant to help prepare your body for future physical activity.

When added together, these *adaptations* to increased activity often cause a slight gain in weight. But don't let this scare you, it is actually a good thing, and a big reason why you shouldn't be too concerned with what the scale says. You see, scales don't tell us where the weight is coming from, and regular activity will make positive changes on the sources of our weight, i.e. muscle vs. fat.

The *Time* article also leads readers to believe that exercise exhausts most people to an extent that they are inactive the rest of the day. This is an addition to what the author calls 'compensation', a supposed over-indulgence on food that more than makes up for any energy spent during exercise. While these things do happen, they are certainly the exception, not the rule. Science (and common sense) tells us that regular activity helps to regulate energy balance—this is why active people are typically leaner and healthier than their sedentary counterparts.

However, in all fairness to *Time* magazine, I do want to point out a few things that the author did get right:

1. People who are physically active are at a significantly lower risk for many diseases.
2. Leading an active lifestyle can likely lead to all the same benefits as traditional exercise routines.
3. The food you eat will play a large role in a successful weight loss plan.

Don't be misled by attention-grabbing headlines and health advice from journalists lacking any sort of health credentials. If you are interested in an objective look at the issue please speak with your local health care professional, who I'm sure will be happy to explain the benefits of physical activity. *Kentz Willis, M.S., is the University Extension Educator in Nutrition and Food Safety for Sheridan and Johnson counties. He can be reached via email at kwillis3@uwyo.edu.*

Note: if you would like a different title it might require some re-working of the intro paragraph. Let me know if you would like me to do this.