

Cardio or Weights – Which One is Better for You?

As someone who works in the fitness industry, this is an all-too-common question I encounter:

“So, let me ask you – which one is better for me...should I focus on cardio or lifting weights?”

My answer is simple: “Yes.”

Upon receiving confused stares, I then say, “Well, it really depends on your goals, but ultimately, both are important and play a role in bettering your health and fitness levels.”

Maybe it’s a boring answer, but allow me to explain it further. Cardio, also known as aerobic activity or cardiovascular activity, can be defined as any activity where you’re repeatedly using large muscle groups, your heart rate increases, and you begin to breathe more deeply. Activities such as walking, running, biking, swimming, and dancing, can all be considered cardio exercise. The benefits of aerobic activity include burning calories, improving heart and muscle health, appetite control, enhanced mood, better sleep, reduction in arthritis pain and stiffness, as well as management of high blood pressure, heart disease, and diabetes, to name a few.

The American Heart Association recommends getting at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity exercise or 75 minutes of vigorous-intensity exercise during the week. If that sounds like a lot, broken down, that equates to approximately 30 minutes, 5 days per week. Remember, if you’re crunched for time breaking that 30-minute bout down even further into 10 minute increments can be just as effective as doing a full, 30-minute round of physical activity.

Benefits of strength training include the development of strong bones, because when you put a load or force (i.e. weight) on the bone, you can increase bone density, and therefore potentially reduce your risk for osteoporosis. Like cardio, strength training also helps with weight management, helps with sleep quality, enhances mood, and cognitive ability. Strength training can also help with balance and may reduce your risk of falls. Too, just as with cardio, you have several options when it comes to the type of weight training you’d like to implement. Using your own body weight counts as resistance training in the form of pull-ups, push-ups, squats, planks, etc. This is low-cost, and a great place for a strength-training novice to start. Free weights, weight machines, and resistance bands are other great options when it comes to adding resistance training to your workout plan.

As with both cardio and strength training, you’ll want to complete a brief warm-up (5-10 minutes) before moving into the main part of your workout program. When strength training, keep in mind that you’ll want to choose a weight where you can move through the exercise in its entirety for 2-3 sets and for 8-12 repetitions, with the last few repetitions presenting some challenge. As you can see, both aerobic activity and strength training have similar as well as their own, individual benefits and should both be added to a workout program for maximum effect.

The next question I typically get is if someone is wanting to complete both weight training and cardio on the same day, then which activity should they do first? This is where it really depends on your fitness goals, and what you’re hoping to achieve. If your goal is to increase your speed or endurance, then cardio needs to come first. Which makes sense, right? It’ll be difficult to enhance speed if we’ve completed a weight training workout just before jumping on a treadmill. Our legs will most likely be fatigued, and thus our cardio workout may not be as effective compared to starting our workout with

aerobic activity. The same principle goes for if our goal is focused on getting stronger or losing weight – we'll want to complete strength training first, so that we're not fatigued by the time we get to the weight training portion of our workout program. In regards to losing weight, it's important to not skip cardio completely, as the aerobic piece of your workout will still most likely burn more calories per minute than strength training will. If you're looking to improve balance or your general, overall fitness then starting with either will work. A good rule of thumb is whatever your highest priority is, (i.e. increasing strength, losing weight, increasing endurance levels, etc.) then start with that portion of your exercise program. Other recommendations include asking yourself which part you like the most when it comes to cardio or strength training, and which component you like the least. Whichever piece you enjoy the least, get that done first since you're more likely to skip out on it later.

Boring answer or not, both cardiovascular activity and strength training are important for enhancing your health, regardless of your fitness goals. As always, if you're a beginner to aerobic activity, strength training, or both, make sure you find a reputable program – whether that's booking an appointment with the certified personal trainer at your gym, or using resources such as the American College of Sports Medicine, American Council on Exercise, or the National Strength and Conditioning Association, to name a few, it's imperative to find professional, valid information to help you reach your fitness goals, and most importantly, to keep you safe.

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