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# Work smarter, not harder

A scientific approach to fitness and overall health can give better results faster

by GORDON CRAIGIE

**T**raditional notions of getting fit tend to focus on time-intensive workout regimens and very strict diets, but what if there were another way? Some scientists and researchers think there is. Numerous recent studies reveal that the human body works best when we stick as close as possible to ancestral human life patterns in terms of workout and diet.

### Fast and furious

"Everybody should lead an active lifestyle in order to stay healthy and reduce the risk of developing diseases such as heart disease, diabetes, cancer

[and other ailments] in later life," Dr Niels Vollaard, lecturer in health and exercise science at the University of Stirling, tells the *Connection*. He says traditional, moderate-intensity exercise is fine, but it requires a lot of time. For people who struggle to find a minimum of two and a half hours in their weekly schedules for exercise, he advocates high-intensity interval training (HIIT).

HIIT involves short bursts of intense activity interspersed with longer recovery periods. While HIIT has long been used by athletes, researchers now have solid evidence of its benefits for the average person too. "As well as being a time-efficient way to train, HIIT has also been shown to be more enjoyable than other forms of exercise and gives a greater sense of achievement and satisfaction," says Dr John Babraj, lecturer in exercise physiology at Abertay University.

Vollaard says that with as little as 30 minutes of exercise a week split into three 10-minute sessions, some HIIT programmes can achieve results similar to or better than 150 minutes of moderate-intensity exercise. "Fitness levels will, on average, go up by around 10 to 15 per cent within six weeks," he says; you'd expect similar results from running four 45-minute sessions a week for six weeks, he notes. Benefits of this level of exercise often include lower blood pressure and improved insulin function.

Babraj agrees, adding, "Moving forward, we expect that this type of exercise may also be very important in maintaining cognitive function as we age."

Specific HIIT training programmes may be easily sourced on the internet or in books such as Dr Michael Mosley's *Fast Exercise* (Short Books LTD, 2013; not available at Costco). Mosley is a well-known medical journalist who presents popular BBC TV shows, such as *Trust Me, I'm A Doctor*; *Infested! Living with Parasites*; and the five-part series *Meet the Humans*.

### Put the right fuel in your tank

Mosley's book *The Fast Diet* (Short Books LTD, 2014; not available at Costco) complements his exercise book. It presents his evidence-based and simplified version of intermittent fasting, also known as the 5:2 diet: restricting calorie intake on two nonconsecutive days each week while eating normally for the other five days.

Mosley has further developed a 5:2 Mediterranean diet, combining the benefits of intermittent fasting with the healthy, low-carb, vegetable-based diet traditionally followed in countries around the Mediterranean (Italy, France, Spain and Greece).

In these countries a whole range of chronic diseases prevalent in the UK are less common, and their traditional diets are credited with playing a significant role. The focus is very much on eating plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables, nuts, beans, lentils, whole grains, olive oil, eggs and fish while reducing consumption of red meat. Mosley believes that this type of diet can help people lose weight, significantly reduce body fat and help to



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prevent certain age-related diseases.

For centuries, traditional practices in many cultures have involved some form of fasting as a way of cleansing or rebooting both the body and the mind. Indeed, it's interesting to consider that intermittent fasting would have actually been the norm during the Stone Age—hunter-gatherers weren't eating regular meals, after all. In fact, they would naturally have been combining intermittent fasting with HIIT, though in their case chasing prey and fleeing predators rather than riding a stationary bike. Thankfully, modern science is now looking at HIIT and fasting in a new light, and we can therefore adopt a more rational approach to our health and wellbeing based on current scientific research. ■

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### Going deeper

The NHS website (nhs.uk; search "Live Well") has lots of diet and exercise advice, including tips to make your diet more Mediterranean by:

- Eating plenty of starchy foods, such as bread and pasta.

- Eating plenty of fruits and vegetables.
- Including fish in your diet.
- Eating less red meat.
- Choosing products made from vegetable and plant oils, such as olive oil.

If you fancy trying HIIT, Dr Niels Vollaard says, "We always

recommend that people get a check-up at their GP first; this is also true for [starting] moderate-intensity exercise. Then, have a chat with a personal trainer at a local gym—they may be able to provide help in starting a HIIT routine."—GC