

The Dao of Exercise

by Ann Rosen and Ross Rosen

Why less may be more when it comes to exercise

Limit Cardio workouts and vigorous exercise.

This is something that regularly meets resistance when we try to create treatment plans with new patients. I imagine it is a hard pill to swallow, particularly when most people have initiated these exercise regimens in the name of health and associate them with a variety of positive results. So I'm not particularly surprised when people balk at the idea of slowing down and replacing their CrossFit workouts or marathon training programs with milder forms of exercise like yoga, taiji and qigong. And, of course, it's a personal choice. But as a health practitioner, I think it's important to understand the possible repercussions of all of the choices we make. So, before you chose your next exercise program, here are some things to consider:

Fitness isn't Health.

Unfortunately, we are finding that the "American workout" has evolved to accommodate "fitness" ideals over true wellness and, as a result, we have more and more patients that come in looking very "fit", but suffering from a growing variety of ailments. In these instances, people have worked very hard to stay in shape and manage their weight. Naturally, they want to maintain what they have worked so hard to achieve. But, I think it is necessary to review the price our bodies often pay in the name of fitness. Once understood, we can then re-orient the dedication and diligence in working towards a goal that instills wellness rather than imbalance.

Excessive exercise over time can weaken and ultimately age us.

Our culture tends towards excess. As Americans, and to an even greater degree, as people from the affluent suburbs of NYC, we are what we would call "Excessive Yang" – a more intense, competitive, driven population. Yang is hot. Yang burns energy. Yang consumes. It can be wonderful – inspiration, movement and vitality – but without the balance of Yin, Yang will send us up in a burst of flames. So we are already living in that relative state of imbalance. As a culture, we already could use a little more yin. Whether it be sleep, meditation, yoga, alkalizing, more blood, more fluids, more cooling, more grounding, we need something to offset and balance out the constant stress and movement that most of us experience daily. And exercise, on some level, can serve as an important tool in preserving balance. But, as a population tending towards yang, it's not surprising that we've tipped the scales in an unfavorable direction.

From a Chinese Medicine perspective, exercise is about keeping everything flowing. Regular and moderate exercise promotes the flow of qi and blood throughout the body and prevents stagnation or "stuckness". It is part of the balancing act that keeps us healthy. Yes, it can burn calories, make us sweat and get our heart rates up, but that's not always something we should be asking our bodies to do. The fluids that constitute perspiration are a valuable resource, not to be squandered in the name of weight loss. And burning calories for the sake of burning calories is simply depleting. The same goes for pushing the heart muscle to capacity.

Furthermore, exercise is only part of the equation. Our bodies require proper nutrition, water, air and rest to subsidize our activity. When yin and yang are in relative balance, we can enjoy moving through life and all its phases in a graceful and healthy way. But when we use yang/energy to burn through our yin/resources too quickly, we literally speed the process of aging. The original design of exercise was not to make us leaner, thinner or more muscular, but rather to promote health and longevity. It's balance.

What we tend to do instead is usually a very different story. Within this culture we typically consume an excess of foods that are far more toxic and far less nourishing than we like to acknowledge. When this happens, our resources are compromised right off the bat. Our digestive systems become overwhelmed and backed up and we accumulate toxins in the form of excess weight and congestion, which further hamper bodily functions and still fail to provide the nourishment we need to sustain energy. However, from the outside, we are far more likely to see the excess we want to shed than we are to nourish the deficiency that underlies this pattern. So we diet and exercise until that excess is shed. And quite often, exercise becomes

the loophole we use when we want to indulge in those things that are toxic. When this happens, it may be possible to stay in great shape, for a while at least, while a person's health simultaneously deteriorates.

So let's take an inventory.

We have these resources that we use to navigate our lives in whatever way we choose. These resources are what we rely on to live. Everything from sweat and tears, to blood, cerebrospinal fluid, semen, hormones and even bone marrow is considered a precious resource that serves a valuable purpose. The fluid we lose in perspiration is expended to cool our bodies, to detoxify and to expel pathogens when we are fighting illness. Urine carries unwanted waste out of our bodies. Even tears are part of a cleansing process.

Generally speaking, the denser the resource, the more precious and difficult to replace, which is why we shed tears far more readily than we would shed blood. Hormones are part of this continuum as well, which is why symptoms associated with hormone imbalance (hyper/hypothyroidism, hot flashes, menstrual irregularities, night sweats) tend to occur more frequently as we tap into deeper resources. And if you're tapping into bone marrow, you had better have a very good reason.

It can be helpful to think of our expenditure of resources from a financial perspective. We have three accounts; a checking account, a savings account and a retirement account. In optimal circumstances we survive off of our checking account, which we can liken to our digestive and respiratory systems. If we eat good food, get sufficient rest, and breath clean healthy air, we provide our bodies with a degree of nourishment sufficient to maintain all our activities. Ideally, we live moderately and our output of energy is less than our input. This way, we can siphon off some of this excess into our savings account. This allows us to draw down into the savings when we have larger demands on our energy or get sick or stressed or work beyond our means for short periods of time.

And finally, we have our retirement account. This is comprised of our inherited/constitutional resources and is stored deeply within the body (think bone marrow). These resources are intended to serve us in our later years and provide us with a degree of health and longevity, although in some circumstances we use them as our emergency fund. This is the digging deep that enabled the "fight or flight" impulses of our ancestors when they had to run from dangerous predators or the resources that allow regular people to somehow find the strength to lift a car when a child's life is in jeopardy. But we should not be tapping into them to push our bodies to their limits in "boot camp" classes. Accessing these reserves to finance daily living expenditures and excesses, we limit available funds/resources for later years.

Excessive exercise over time requires us to tap into our retirement funds and deplete the root. And while some like to romanticize the expression "Live fast, die young", what you are more likely to see when you tap into these resources, are signs of premature aging – low back, knee and hip pain, arthritis, premature graying, hair loss, osteopenia/osteoporosis, arteriosclerosis and other degenerative conditions. And unfortunately, even in the absence of these symptoms, many people will also find that they have to work harder and harder to achieve the same result over time.

Vigorous cardio workouts generate a lot of heat, which can dry and deplete body fluids, which then creates viscosity in the blood, hampering circulation and drying out vessel walls. Muscles, tendons and blood vessels also lose flexibility and elasticity creating tightness and rigidity in the body, further hampering circulation. Furthermore, that same heat is associated with acidity in the blood. The body then tries to access minerals (i.e. calcium) from the bones to alkalize that inflammatory heat. That calcium then accumulates in the blood, which can then contribute to the formation of plaques on the vessel walls, hampering circulation. Once circulation is affected, it becomes increasingly difficult for the blood to nourish the organs and tissues so there is a cascade effect.

So should you stop everything? No. Exercise and movement are essential to good health and abrupt changes to your lifestyle can shock the system unnecessarily. However, we often recommend slowing things down. A brisk walk is great way to get fresh air and keep things flowing. From a Chinese medical perspective, the goal is not to get your heart rate up and you want to avoid profuse sweating and labored breathing – these are indications that exercise is becoming too taxing. The focus is on breathing and

circulation. To this end, yoga, tai ji and qi gong are ideal forms of exercise, as they all involve attention to the breath and are also known to promote the circulation of “qi” or vital energy through the channels. These are also considered “cultivating” forms of exercise, with the added benefits of building and restoring the vital resources. Whereas most Western aerobic exercise requires that the heart work harder, exercises like qi gong improve circulation instead by creating elasticity in the blood vessels. Rather than venting and releasing energy, which is often how we experience relief and eventually fatigue after a cardiovascular workout, we can circulate and restore and experience the relaxation that people commonly feel after a yoga class. And while both forms of exercise will temporarily enhance metabolism, yoga, tai ji and qi gong strengthen the metabolism over time while cardiovascular exercises tend to become less effective over time and can eventually tax the adrenals.

True healing takes time and patience, but the benefits of slowing down and making that time tend to be profound and lasting. Many people are amazed by how simple shifts in diet and lifestyle can energize, reverse age-related symptoms, speed healing and promote wellness.