



Exercise and “Fat Lag Time”

There may be a stage at the beginning or middle of your exercise or diet program when you think that you aren't losing any fat. The scale may not be moving or certain areas of your body may even seem to increase in size. In fact, you might think you are actually gaining fat! Well, guess what? It isn't an illusion. But it isn't a bad thing, either. Here's why. Fat is stored in three general areas: the layer under the skin (subcutaneous fat), between muscles, and inside your body around your internal organs (visceral fat). Take a good look at some corn fed beef the next time you are in the grocery store and note that most of fat is around the outside of the steak and there is also fat dispersed within the meat—what butchers call the marble. Cows are fed enormous amounts of carbohydrates and perform minimal activities, designed to make them fatter when they go to market.

The collection of fat in all the areas mentioned takes time to accumulate. And as you know, fat will take time and effort to burn. Fat also needs time to mobilize or loosen up before it can be metabolized or burned. As you work your muscles, you do not burn the subcutaneous fat well until the fat within your muscle is burned and some of the visceral fat is burned first. Furthermore, the slight increase in muscle mass and this slow fat burning process, combined with your perceived lack of progress - both on the bathroom scale and what you see in the mirror, can be discouraging. Just hang in there and stay the course. Your new metabolic muscle machinery will take care of your fat layer layers soon enough.

Another issue is something I call “fat lag time.” It simply means that no matter how gung-ho you are about diet and exercise, it will take time to physically see the results of your efforts. The marathon exercise session you do one day won't be noticeable the next day, no matter how hard you worked out or how little you ate. Remember, your activities use ATP and it takes time to replenish your supplies. The fat burned to make more ATP that you are trying to shed doesn't go immediately from your belly to your muscles. You can't expect to instantly melt an inch from your waist even after an endurance race. The time it takes to feel positive effects differs from person to person, but generally, the effort you expended one day will not bestow its reward for 2-to-3 days. But it will happen. If you do notice changes immediately, you can assume that it is due to the loss of fluid, not fat.

The delayed effects of fat gain and loss work both ways. A three-day weekend of pigging out may not show immediately either, but will have your body begging for restitution before the work week is finished. Paybacks can be hard. This is not meant to be discouraging. It simply takes the same amount of energy and time to gain fat as it does to lose fat. The latter just seems to take longer because losing fat involves more effort. Something to think about next time your overindulgences span across more than a day or two.