FITNESS & EXERCISE

Can You Lose Fat and Build Muscle Together?

The evidence supports combining cardio and strength work, but the scale may be the least useful judge of what is changing.

The scale tells one story

You start lifting, add some brisk walking and wait for the scale to confirm that it is working. Then the number barely moves. It is tempting to decide that you cannot lose fat while building muscle-or that your carefully balanced plan has somehow cancelled itself out.

But body mass, fat mass and fat-free mass are different outcomes. A 2025 systematic review and meta-analysis separated them when it compared aerobic training, resistance training and programmes combining both. That distinction matters because a single body-weight reading cannot tell you which tissue has changed.

The review included 36 studies and 1,564 metabolically healthy adults, with 31 studies providing enough data for the meta-analysis. It found that aerobic training and combined training were more effective than resistance training alone at reducing absolute fat mass. Yet there was no difference between exercise modes in the percentage of body fat lost.

So the answer is more interesting than a clean yes or no. Combining aerobic and resistance exercise can support fat loss, while resistance exercise supplies the kind of challenge used to build stronger muscles. The evidence provided here does not establish that every person will lose fat and gain muscle simultaneously, or tell you how food intake changes that possibility. It does show that the two forms of exercise can live in the same plan without one automatically defeating the other.

Two goals need two kinds of work

Aerobic exercise raises your breathing and heart rate. Walking, running, swimming, dancing and cycling are examples. Resistance training asks your muscles to push or pull against weights, resistance bands or your own body weight. These are not rival camps. They produce different kinds of work, and most people benefit from a mixture of exercise types.

In the 2025 analysis, adding resistance training to aerobic work neither improved nor impeded fat-mass loss compared with the relevant exercise programmes. When researchers matched workloads across aerobic, resistance and combined training, the groups had similar changes in

fat mass, body mass, body-fat percentage and fat-free mass.

That workload finding is easy to miss. Simply attaching the word "strength" or "cardio" to a programme did not determine everything that happened. How much work participants did and how long the intervention lasted also mattered. In studies shorter than 10 weeks, the review found no significant difference in fat loss between the three exercise approaches.

For studies lasting at least 10 weeks, aerobic exercise reduced body mass more than resistance exercise. That does not make it the complete answer to a two-part goal. If you want to challenge muscle as well as reduce fat mass, resistance work has a job that a body-weight result alone does not capture.

Training to muscular failure does not appear necessary for gains in muscle size or strength.

You do not have to choose sides

One persistent worry is that cardio must be kept away from lifting. The available evidence is reassuring. In the 2025 review, combined programmes produced similar losses in body mass and body-fat percentage whether aerobic and resistance exercise happened on the same day or on different days. A difference in fat-mass loss appeared in only one study comparing resistance training with combined training performed on separate days.

That does not prove timing never matters for any individual or any training goal. It means this review did not find a general fat-loss advantage from separating the two forms of exercise. If putting them together makes activity easier to fit into your life, the evidence does not give you a fat-loss reason to avoid doing so.

The more useful question is whether you can repeat the work. Your body adapts to the activity you practise, and regular practice helps you improve. Building up slowly can help you progress without pushing too hard all at once. Even modest amounts of physical activity are useful for health, and short periods can still count as movement.

Consistency sounds less exciting than an optimised split between exercise types. It is also the part that survives a busy week. Choosing activities you enjoy, writing plans into a calendar and involving someone who will support you can make regular activity easier to maintain. The perfect arrangement that you repeatedly miss has less practical value than a workable combination you continue.

Failure is not the finish line

Muscle-building advice often turns every set into a test of suffering: if you could complete one

more repetition, the set supposedly did not count. A 2022 systematic review and meta-analysis of 15 studies found no significant overall difference in strength or muscle growth between resistance training taken to muscular failure and training stopped before failure.

There were nuances. When studies did not match training volume, non-failure training favoured strength gains. Among people who already did resistance training, failure training had a small advantage for muscle growth. But all participants in the included studies were young adults, so the findings may not apply as neatly to older adults or highly trained people.

The central point is liberating: training to muscular failure does not appear necessary for gains in muscle size or strength. It did not appear broadly harmful to those adaptations either. Failure is an option, not proof that the session worked.

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Pain, extreme shortness of breath or dizziness changes the conversation. Stop exercising and seek help if those occur. If you have trouble moving or balancing, have been inactive for a long time, have a health condition, or are concerned that exercise may not be safe, ask a health care professional what kinds of activity suit you before treating this as a do-it-yourself body-composition project.

Make Monday easier to repeat

On Monday, choose one aerobic activity you genuinely tolerate and one form of resistance you can use safely. The aerobic option might be walking, cycling, swimming or dancing. Resistance can come from your body weight, a resistance band or weights. You do not need elaborate equipment, but you do need a form of resistance if building stronger muscle is part of the goal.

Then put both choices into a paper calendar or the calendar on your phone. This is not a demand for a punishing timetable. It is a way to turn "I should exercise" into a decision you no longer have to remake when the day becomes crowded. Start slowly, show up regularly and build the challenge gradually rather than trying to settle both goals with one heroic workout.

Keep the first week focused on what you can control: completing both kinds of movement, using equipment properly and noticing whether the plan fits your life. Do not make a single scale reading the referee. The studies measured fat mass, body-fat percentage and fat-free mass separately precisely because body weight cannot explain every change.

What this takes is simple: a paper calendar or phone calendar, comfortable walking shoes for an aerobic option, and a resistance band or weights for strength work. Put those objects where Monday can find them. The plan that combines both goals only becomes useful when it is easy

enough to begin again.

Where this comes from

- Exercise and Physical Fitness

  MedlinePlus, U.S. National Library of Medicine · https://medlineplus.gov/exerciseandphysicalfitness.html
- Exercise for Older Adults

  MedlinePlus, U.S. National Library of Medicine · https://medlineplus.gov/exerciseforolderadults.html
- Physical Activity and Your Heart - What Is Physical Activity?

  National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute · https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/heart/physical-activity
- Tips for Starting Physical Activity

  National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases · https://www.niddk.nih.gov/health-information/weight-management/tips-get-active/tips-starting-physical-activity
- Summarizing the effects of different exercise types in chronic low back pain - a systematic review of systematic reviews.

  BMC musculoskeletal disorders, 2022 · https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/35996124/
- Effects of resistance training performed to repetition failure or non-failure on muscular strength and hypertrophy: A systematic review and meta-analysis.

  Journal of sport and health science, 2022 · https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/33497853/
- Which specific modes of exercise training are most effective for treating low back pain? Network meta-analysis.

  British journal of sports medicine, 2020 · https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/31666220/
- Exercise Training Guidelines for Multiple Sclerosis, Stroke, and Parkinson Disease: Rapid Review and Synthesis.

  American journal of physical medicine & rehabilitation, 2020 · https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/30844920/
- Comparison of concurrent, resistance, or aerobic training on body fat loss: a systematic review and meta-analysis.

  Journal of the International Society of Sports Nutrition, 2025 · https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/40405489/