

An illustration of a woman with brown hair in a bun, wearing a white short-sleeved shirt and yellow pants, holding purple dumbbells in a gym setting. The background features a window with a cityscape and a rack of dumbbells on the left. The floor is orange wood, and a purple box is on the right.

Your ideal workout

Burn fat, lose weight,
be more flexible –
whatever your
fitness goal, we
help you discover
the best way to
achieve it

Got plans to unleash a new, even better you this year? Whether you want to tone up, de-stress or build muscle, you need to know the best way to do it. We've tracked down definitive research and top experts to ensure you reach your goals.

THE BEST WAY TO...

burn fat

Wouldn't it be great to lose those wobbly bits with the least possible effort? We've found out how. New research by the University of Guelph, Canada, reveals interval training burns fat and improves fitness more quickly than constant but moderately intensive physical activity. The study, published in the *Journal of Applied Physiology*, found that by doing interval training, exercisers burned 36 per cent more fat in an hour than by doing moderate cycling. Meanwhile, their cardiovascular fitness improved 13 per cent. The women alternated four-minute bursts of cycling at 90 per cent effort with two-minute rest intervals.

Similar results were found in a recent study by the University of New South Wales (UNSW) in Australia, where a group who did a 20-minute session of eight-second sprints on an exercise bike, followed by 12 seconds of light exercise, lost three times as much fat as those who exercised at a continuous pace for 40 minutes.

Professor Steve Boutcher at UNSW, says interval training works because it produces a unique metabolic response. 'Intermittent sprinting produces high levels of chemical compounds that allow more fat to be burned from under the skin and within the exercising muscles,' he says.

So interval training seems to be the way to go, but what kind of exercise is best? 'It doesn't matter what the mode of exercise is – it's the intervals that are important,' says exercise physiologist John Buckley from the University of Chester. 'And because interval training gives you short breaks, the total amount of time you exercise for tends to be longer than if you were exercising continuously. People should choose an exercise they're likely to enjoy so that they stick at it,' he adds.

Steven Hawkins, associate professor of exercise science at the California Lutheran University in the US, agrees. 'The "best" exercise is the one that you will do,' he says. 'To say Spinning is better than running for fat burning is only relevant to someone who likes to Spin. For fat burning, the volume of exercise [the combination of duration and intensity] you do is vital – the longer and harder you work out, the more fat you'll burn.'

THE BEST WAY TO...

build muscle

Don't worry, you're not going to turn into Arnie overnight by pumping a bit of iron! A common misconception about building muscle is that you'll end up with Popeye-style biceps and a chest the size of a body-builder by simply looking at a dumbbell, but that's not the case. Women can't increase their muscle mass in the same way as men, since we don't produce enough testosterone, the main hormone responsible for increasing muscle size.

There are plenty of easy ways to shape, define and strengthen your muscles without losing your femininity. 'Strength training using weights is the preferred option to improve muscle strength,' says Buckley, 'but if you're unfit, any exercise will contribute to initial improvements.'

If you do want to build up bigger muscles, you need

high-intensity loading of muscle, says Hawkins – and resistance training is a great way to do this. 'Sprint (short sprints with a long recovery time) and power training

(jumping or lifting fast and forcefully) also build muscle, but not to the same extent as resistance training,' he says.

Guys who really bulk up lift very heavy weights and tend to do less than eight repetitions. 'Your muscles will tone up if you lift a weight with which you can comfortably do 15 reps. Your muscles will get a bit bigger and increase in strength, but you won't bulk up overall,' says Buckley.

“To tone up, you'll see the best results if you mix a range of exercises and disciplines”

THE BEST WAY TO...

tone up

This all depends which parts of your body you're looking to tone up. If you want to tone and shape your legs, a mixture of running, cycling, swimming and lunges with hand-held weights will work wonders, while to tone up your arms, you need to focus on tricep dips, skipping, swimming and weights.

But there's a pattern emerging here. To tone up, you'll see the best results if you mix a range of exercises and workout disciplines. Buckley recommends doing a variety of aerobic exercises that use as many muscle groups as possible – such as cycling, jogging and swimming. 'Toning up is not like losing weight,' he says, 'and people often confuse the two things. If you lose fat, your muscles will appear to be more shapely, but to really tone them up, you need to work them.' ▶

THE BEST WAY TO...

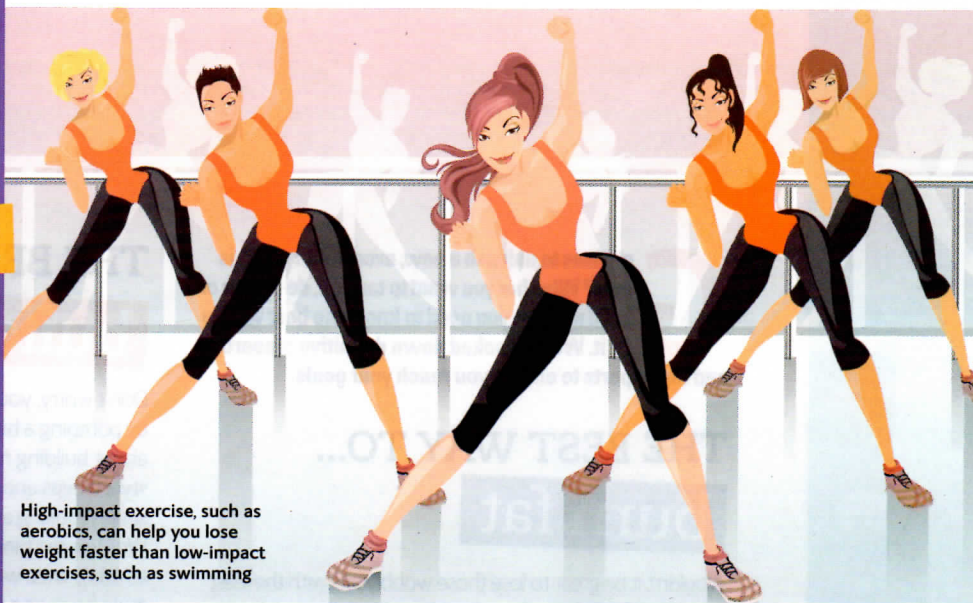
lose weight

Exercise alone is not enough to lose those festive pounds – you need to combine your routine with a sensible diet, too. A recent study of women trying to lose their 'baby weight' after pregnancy found those who worked out did not lose significantly more weight than those who did no specific exercise. But the women who combined exercise with dieting shed the most pounds.

'The best activity for burning calories is vigorous cross-country skiing, but it's impractical in the UK,' says Sam Murphy, fitness expert and author of *The Real Woman's Personal Trainer* (Kyle Cathie, £14.99). 'Choose an activity you enjoy and that you'll stick to – you need to do it regularly.

Make sure you choose weight-bearing exercise, such as running or high-impact aerobics that involves lots of jumping.' Swimming and cycling are out, says Murphy. They support your weight so you aren't burning calories as fast. Furthermore, a study published in the *International Journal of Sport Nutrition and Exercise Metabolism* examined the effect of water temperature on calorie intake after swimming, and found that people who swam in cold water ate 44 per cent more calories after their workout than those who swam in a neutral temperature.

'For calorie expenditure, running beats most forms of exercise,' says Murphy. 'But it's only good if you're a fan – if you hate running, you'll never go.' The amount of calories you'll burn during a run depends on your weight and how fast you're running, but, at a leisurely 10-minute-mile pace (a beginner's rate), a 10-stone woman would burn a whopping 635 calories per hour.



High-impact exercise, such as aerobics, can help you lose weight faster than low-impact exercises, such as swimming

Sports scientist John Brewer agrees. He recommends performing a variety of different exercises for all-over toning, since a muscle will only gain strength when it's used for exercise. 'While losing weight will give the appearance of good tone, the underlying physiology of the muscle will only change when it's used regularly. A combination of aerobic and resistance exercise that involves a variety of muscle groups is best, combined with a diet that's low in fat to aid weight loss,' he says.

THE BEST WAY TO...

get flexible

Flexibility is important for fitness, especially as you get older – it can prevent lower back pain, stiffness and injuries and help maintain good mobility in the joints.

According to Brewer, there are no right or wrong exercises to improve flexibility, but it's important to raise your body temperature first. 'This ensures the muscle is supple and will stretch more easily, without the risk of muscle damage,' he says. He recommends doing light aerobic work while wearing warm clothes (such as a tracksuit) for five to 10 minutes to help prepare your body for flexibility work. 'Most exercise instructors would recommend stretching to a position of tolerable discomfort, holding this stretch for five to 10 seconds, then repeating, as a good way of improving flexibility,' he adds.

But what about taking up yoga or Pilates? 'Both are excellent ways of boosting flexibility,' says Buckley, 'and a combination of the two would be ideal as they do different things. Pilates requires mobility, but it also helps to develop core strength. Yoga, on the other hand, is much more about joint flexibility.' Indeed, research from the

University of California in the US showed that after only eight weeks of practising yoga, subjects' flexibility increased by 188 per cent; strength by 31 per cent and muscular endurance by 57 per cent. So practise those asanas!

THE BEST WAY TO...

beat stress

It's hardly surprising an ancient mind-body form of exercise such as yoga has staggering results when it comes to stress relief. New research presented to the American College of Sports Medicine found practising yoga can lessen anxiety, heighten concentration and improve motivation in as little as eight weeks. The study, which followed 84 hatha yoga students during a 10-week course, found significant increases in each of the three areas after just eight weeks. 'While Westerners tend to regard yoga primarily as a physical discipline, in the East it's pursued as a mindful discipline, helping people live their lives with clarity and a positive outlook,' says author of the study Traci Statler.

But what if you don't like yoga? Don't panic. 'It's wrong to think the only type of exercise that's relaxing is yoga or Pilates,' says Brewer. 'Any type of exercise that you enjoy will achieve this effect.' Buckley agrees. 'Any activity you enjoy and do for more than five minutes at a time will reduce stress,' he says. 'If it's your environment that's causing you stress, anything that takes you outside it is good.'

Countless studies have shown working out outside helps improve your mood and beat depression – recent research found a 30-minute walk in the countryside boosted self-esteem in 90 per cent of participants, while 71 per cent felt less tense. So choose a sunny day, lace up your trainers and get out there! ■