

Debunking Fitness Myths About Bulking Up, Carbs, Light Weights, HIIT, Visualisation

By Sarah Berry

Sweeping statements about fitness are often simplistic. Or wrong. Arming ourselves with information is the best way to find our own fit within fitness, because certain rules may or may not apply depending on your goals.

Here are five common fitness maxims that might just be myths.

Bulking up

There is a reason this big myth doesn't die. Time and time again trainers argue that big weights will not a bulky woman make. And this is true. In part. Problem is that this theoretical myth-busting line is part myth, too. Many of us know that when we train differently we do, in fact, see a difference in our shape.

"There's absolutely no doubt that a resistance training plan that works with your body type will make you stronger, healthier, more shapely and improve bone density. It's also really empowering to feel yourself getting strong," says Libby Babet, founder of Agoga and Bottoms Up! Fitness.

"I will admit though, it really annoys me when trainers say that women, 'can never get bulky' from lifting weights. Erm ... actually, that totally depends on what each woman's definition of 'bulky' is, thank you very much.

"All you have to do is take a look at some female body builders and dedicated Crossfitters to prove that us girls can grow serious muscles...

"Women might not be able to grow as big as the blokes, but if we don't have enough variability in our routines, neglect cardio, or get a little too excited about those post-workout shakes, our muscles will certainly grow. That's fine if you're into it, but for some women an extra few centimetres of muscle is still too much and as trainers, we've got to respect that."

Founder of London-based W10 gym, Jean Claude, clarifies further: "Unless you lift heavy, for a lot of reps, at a high volume, and significantly increase your calorific intake, it won't happen. The key is in the program. And regardless of the weight, ultimately it comes down to diet."

Low carb is best for weight loss

Cutting carbs or fat may kickstart weight loss in the short term, but can be counterproductive for keeping it off in the long term, according to Jean Claude.

"Carbohydrates are an important fuel, especially if you're working out regularly, and a certain amount of fat is important in your diet to aid fat loss; fat improves cell permeability and signalling, speeding up your metabolism," he explains.

"It's less about quantity than quality – stick to unrefined carbs that provide your body with essential vitamins, minerals and fibre, like quinoa, brown rice, oats, pulses and vegetables."

Similarly good fats like nuts, avocados, coconut and extra virgin olive oils, butter and oily fish will have a different effect on our body than fat from fried or fast foods. The other thing to keep in mind with any new diet trend is that what works for one person may not work for you.

"When it comes to what the right nutrition plan for you is, it really depends on your genetic type, body shape, goals and lifestyle," Babet says. "Some people need more carbs, while others should steer towards more proteins or fats. It really does depend on what your genetic type is and the kind of lifestyle you live.

"So don't get too caught up on the latest diet trends, but do focus on a few things: eating whole foods that are not processed, avoiding trans fats and being aware of how much sugar, salt and chemicals are in the foods you're eating."

High Intensity Interval Training (HIIT) is king

HIIT might be all the rage for the way it maximises our metabolic rate and helps us to better burn fat while we're resting. But hit it too hard and you might lose more than you gain. There is the greater risk, with the increased intensity, of injury. There is also the chance of diminishing returns from doing too much of it.

"The world seems obsessed with high intensity training at the moment but do too much of it and the only result you'll achieve is adrenal burnout and lack of motivation," Babet warns.

"Mix things up with a balance of higher intensity workouts and lower intensity/recovery sessions for best results."

She adds: "Lifting weights is amazing for shaping your body, but a good run in the open air does wonders for your mood, hormones, the health of your connective tissue and your mindset.

"Yoga and pilates will increase flexibility and core strength, while dance, boxing and martial arts improve reaction time and coordination. So why not do it all!"

Visualisation is only for elite athletes

From Muhammad Ali to Michael Phelps, visualisation is a key component in the preparation of professional athletes. Is there any point for the rest of us though?

Yes, it turns out. A study from the '60s by Australian psychologist Alan Richardson found it can dramatically improve anyone's performance. In the experiment, he divided a random group of students into three groups. The first practised basketball throws daily for 20 days. The other groups only practised on the first and final days of the test. The difference between those groups was that the third group practiced daily visualisation. The group that practised daily improved by 24 per cent, while the visualisers improved by 23 per cent. The second group made no significant improvement. Practice might make closer to perfect, but a bit of vision can help us all get closer to where we want to be.

Light weights are useless

Lifting less weight more times is just as effective at building muscle as training with heavy weights, a study from McMaster University found. You just have to do more reps, the researchers said, and work to the point of fatigue.

"A much broader range of loads including quite light loads can induce muscle growth, provided it is lifted to the point where it is difficult to maintain good form," said study supervisor Stuart Phillips.

Many still disagree, or say there is a strong caveat: that you gradually need to increase the load to continue to see benefits.

"What doesn't challenge you won't change you," Jean Claude says. "You need to challenge your body to get the benefits that lifting can bring."

"When it comes to toning your body up, it's time under tension that really matters and if you're using lighter weights," adds Babet, "you just need to up the reps, or add other demanding exercises, like plyometrics to your routine."