

Get the Facts: Burning Fat without Losing Muscle

Fact:

In a perfect world, we could go to the gym for 30 minutes and gain massive amounts of muscle while burning away all the fat. Unfortunately, this does not happen. Similar to other areas of the body, there is a balance between muscle breakdown and muscle formation. The stress applied to us by the outside world dictates which direction these mechanics will sway. This is the fundamental concept of adaptation. For example, if an animal comes across a large meal, it will store this meal as fat as well as create muscle to allow it to hunt for another meal. If, however, it does not eat at all, the muscle may begin to atrophy and will be used as fuel reserves along with the fats.

So how do we do one while limiting the other? There are a few tricks and theories on how to keep the muscle and burn the fat. The overarching method that I use is slow and controlled. If weight drops too quickly, it is hard to determine what and where the weight loss came from. Here's what I suggest.

Make sure to keep track of as many variables as possible (weight, food intake, strength, etc.). I like for most of the weight loss to come from diet rather than cardio. This may be more feasible to some due to variation in metabolism but cardio should be supplementary. There is strong evidence showing how anaerobic exercise promotes catabolic processes and inhibits anabolic processes. Too much or too intense of cardiovascular training may exacerbate muscle loss. Start by slowly dropping your daily calorie consumption. Keep an eye on your weight and try to reach a point where you lose around 1-2lbs per week. Any more and you risk excess muscle wasting. 1lb of fat is roughly 3,500 calories worth of energy so to lose 1lb per week, 500 calories per day would need to be removed if you are eating exactly the amount you need to stay at a steady weight.

Next, keep a pretty reliable lifting routine. Decreasing weight slightly while increasing reps will help to burn a few calories without jumping into anaerobic territory. Simultaneously, building up strength and endurance will help offset the increased risk of injury due to the lower calorie diet. As you progress, it might seem like there is a plateau where you just stop losing weight without changing anything. This is the metabolic adaptation to your new routine and means that it is time for another change in diet.

Protein intake is another good way to maintain muscle mass especially in a low-caloric state. If the body thinks it is fasting, it will attempt to use protein as a fuel source. Combining a good weight training routine with proper protein intake will help muscles heal and prevent muscle wasting.

Conclusion:

Everyone's body works a little differently so you might have to play around with how much you eat, lift, or run. That said, the key points to take away are: keep an eye on your numbers, adapt and be flexible to the way your body reacts, make protein and resistance training a key part of your routine, and don't give up - it takes at least 6-8 weeks for noticeable changes so don't become discouraged if you don't see a difference right away.

There is a great round table discussion about this topic with some renowned fitness professionals if you would like more info about this topic.

Article By: Adam Heilmann, M2