

The Seven Truths of Fitness

By Richard J. Wolff, RD, LDN

We think about fitness, we talk about fitness, we read about fitness, we even dream about it, we just don't live it. Being fit has become the great unrealized American dream.

Today we have more exercise equipment but less physical activity, more food but less nourishment, more advice but less action and more experts but fewer solutions. The challenge we face is to uncover the truth. What behaviors will truly make a difference? Is it even possible to make fitness a part of who we are? These questions are pondered by millions of Americans every day.

Contrary to most fitness advice, my message is one of hope and simplicity. It's much easier than you think to become fit. *The Seven Truths of Fitness* are biologically accurate and behaviorally relevant. There are no theoretical systems or unproven concepts - just common sense, logic and science.

Truth 1: Build Minutes

In a country overwhelmed with confusing fitness advice, it's easy to see why more people don't embrace an active lifestyle. Complicated exercise programs that require intense effort can discourage even the most committed exerciser.

Unfortunately, most people believe that physical activity needs to be intense and performed over long periods of time to be beneficial. Despite this belief, there is strong evidence linking short bouts of moderate-intensity physical activity to better health.

The American College of Sports Medicine, the U.S. Surgeon General and the National Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, recommend approximately 30 minutes of physical activity on most days of the week. They also acknowledge that dividing your physical activity into shorter bouts (three 10-minute walks versus one 30-minute walk) provides the same health benefit.

Given that the average American does just about nothing, the real issue is to do something! I recommend building minutes by including both short and long bouts of physical activity.

Truth 2: Create a Safe Haven

All parents understand the necessity of raising their children in a safe environment. Yet most of us ignore this essential principle when it comes to managing our own health.

Behavioral research has shown that we consume the foods most readily available in our environment. Therefore, our food choices are primarily a function of the environments we create at home and work.

With fast food available 24 hours a day, two-for-one pizza specials, jumbo bags of chips, and billion-dollar marketing campaigns, it's no wonder we overeat on low-nutrition foods. Food consumption surveys indicate average Americans get most of their calories from foods like hamburgers, snack chips, French fries and soda pop. This is a dismal statistic given that these foods provide very little nutrition.

If you're serious about improving your diet, begin by improving your environment. Create a safe haven in your home by purchasing more of the foods that protect your health and less of the foods that don't.

Truth 3: Emphasize “Yes” Behaviors

People cite a multitude of reasons for not practicing good nutrition, including time barriers, confusion regarding what to eat, and the dread of giving up their favorite foods.

The easiest way to improve your diet is to emphasize “yes” behaviors. Emphasizing “yes” behaviors involves identifying what to eat instead of what not to eat. Adding healthy foods (whole fruits and vegetables, whole grains, yogurt, fish, nuts, lean red meat, water, tea, etc.) to your daily and weekly diet provides your body with essential nutrients and displaces (pushes out) less nutritious foods.

A study that looked at this very issue was published in the *International Journal of Epidemiology* in 2002. The study examined the diets of over 59,000 women and found that those who ate a high variety of healthy foods (a “yes” behavior approach) had a 42% lower mortality rate (death rate) than those reporting a low intake of those foods.

The authors of this study concluded that increasing the number of healthy foods regularly consumed is more important than decreasing the number of less-healthy foods regularly consumed.

Truth 4: Include Strength Training

According to the American College of Sports Medicine there is overwhelming evidence supporting the health benefits of strength training (lifting weights). The American Heart Association also endorses strength training for reducing the risk of heart disease. According to Dr. Miriam Nelson, exercise scientist at Tufts University, “*Muscle is the absolute center piece for being healthy, vital, and independent as we grow older.*”

Scientists used to think that losing muscle was a natural part of aging. We now know that inactivity (our lifestyle) contributes more to muscle loss than aging does. According to Andrew Weil, M.D., professor of medicine at the University of Arizona, “*You can start strength training and benefit from it at any age.*”

What most people don’t realize is that one workout per week has been shown to prevent the age-related loss of muscle and bone (sarcopenia). Just one workout per week can keep your body strong and functional – allowing you to live life on your terms.

Truth 5: Add Color

Every health agency in the world emphasizes fruits and vegetables as the central part of a healthy diet. In 1996 a review of 206 high-quality studies concluded that people who eat the most fruits and vegetables have half the risk of developing cancer as those who eat the least. Despite all the good news, few Americans are taking advantage of these super foods!

Recent research indicates that the pigments found in fruits and vegetables are responsible for many of their health benefits. These health-promoting pigments are found in all fresh, frozen and canned fruits and vegetables. Adding colorful fruits and vegetables to your diet is one of the easiest ways to infuse your body with thousands of disease-fighting compounds.

Truth 6: Think “Easy Wins”

There’s no arguing the fact that eating sensibly has become exceedingly difficult in today’s modern culture. Over the past 25 years America has been hammered by a tidal wave of low-nutrition foods that are cheap, convenient and calorie-dense. The result of this trend is that we now live in a nutritionally unsupportive environment that some people would characterize as toxic.

Despite this trend there are effective ways to improve your diet. Building new eating habits in an unsupportive environment requires strategic thinking and good decision making simultaneously. An “easy win” approach integrates both of these principles by focusing on making the easiest change first.

This approach is especially useful for weight management. Cutting calories is as easy as finding high-calorie foods you can live without. Substituting low-calorie protein sources (fish, poultry, veggie burgers, etc.) for red meat is an easy win I use consistently. By focusing on easy, wins I save thousands of calories in a typical week without feeling deprived. This allows me to enjoy dessert (which I really love) a couple of times a week without gaining weight.

Truth 7: Practice Daily

Imagine being told you have a life-threatening disease. Your only hope is to take medicine every day for the rest of your life. Fortunately, that medicine is free and available 24 hours a day.

That life-saving medicine just happens to be daily physical activity. Hard to believe but true – in just 10 minutes you can strengthen your body and mind. It's a simple lesson that most of us still need to learn. An inactive lifestyle will bring about serious health problems at an accelerated rate. When it comes to improving the quality of life, nothing compares to physical activity.

An analysis of 78 studies published in the *Journal of Psychosomatic Research* concluded that an inactive lifestyle produces unusual stress on brain chemistry. Small amounts of activity can actually offset this stress. A study published in the journal, *Health Psychology*, found that 10 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity (brisk walking) was sufficient to improve mood and reduce fatigue. Other studies have found significant health benefits (such as less heart disease) with as little as 10 minutes of daily physical activity. When it comes to physical activity, *anything* is drastically better than nothing.

Your Next Step

It's important to realize that you could finish reading this article with nothing more than good ideas. How many times have you encountered potentially life-changing information and done absolutely nothing about it?

The power of *The Seven Truths of Fitness* lives in its simplicity. Therefore, my challenge to you is a simple one. Commit ten minutes every day for the next 30 days to one of the *Seven Truths*. Ask yourself, "Where can I improve?" That's where you begin. Accept my challenge and your life may change forever!