

Improving health should be the focus of commercial diet programs, not just losing weight

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If losing weight is on your list of New Year resolutions, be sure to include both diet and exercise. New research published today in *Applied Physiology, Nutrition, and Metabolism* evaluated commercial weight loss programs by comparing those that formally include exercise with those that merely advocate for exercise to determine weight loss results and reductions in risk factors associated with heart disease and other health issues. The study found that the most effective programs for weight loss and improved health outcomes include both diet and exercise as part of the mandated program. The study looked at a randomized group of 133 sedentary, overweight women who were placed into respective treatment groups for 12 weeks.

Metabolic syndrome is the presence of [risk factors](#), such as increased blood pressure, excess body fat around the waist, and abnormal cholesterol or triglyceride levels, that increase an individual's risk for [heart disease](#) and other health issues. "When starting a new [diet](#) program, participants should consider not only [weight loss](#) as a goal but also a reduction in associated health risk factors. Our research shows that the best way to both lose weight and improve health is a synergistic approach to both diet and exercise that includes aerobic and strength training," says Dr. Conrad Earnest, lead co-author of the study and researcher at the Exercise & Sport Nutrition Lab at Texas A&M University. "Our study found that a commercial program that offers a concurrent diet and exercise program results in greater improvements in

metabolic syndrome in the 12 weeks of the program," continues Dr. Earnest.

While it is common sense that exercise is an important part of improving health, despite much well-established advocacy for better diet and [exercise habits](#), a large percentage of populations, in the U.S. and worldwide, are still not engaging in regular exercise or eating well. Adding to this has been a lack of research within commercialized diet programs on the benefits of adding [regular physical activity](#). Though many commercial programs suggest or recommend regular physical activity, few programs offer a direct program to their clientele, leaving physical activity up to the consumer.

This study highlights that merely advocating for exercise is not enough. "When exercise is formally incorporated into diet programs there is marked improvement in [metabolic syndrome](#)," says Dr. Earnest. "While all groups in our study lost a significant amount of body weight, the reduction of risk factors should also be celebrated and supported by policy interventions and advocacy. Weight loss is not the only goal here."

A segmented approach to diet and exercise has also been seen by other researchers and policy makers who often think of diet and exercise as independent activities. The study done by Dr. Baetge, Dr. Earnest, Dr. Kreider and their team suggests that it is time to formally consider both tactics with the goal of improving overall health.

Ready to get started on that resolution? "Jumping in with a better diet, aerobic and resistance training can be intimidating and overwhelming. Start with what you can manage, if that is all three - great, if not, pick the one you are most likely to stick with, get comfortable with that and then add another component," recommends Dr. Earnest. "You'll also benefit from the fact that adding [exercise](#) to a healthy diet or diet program improves health and sets the stage for weight maintenance later

on."

More information: Claire Baetge et al, Efficacy of a randomized trial examining commercial weight loss programs and exercise on metabolic syndrome in overweight and obese women, *Applied Physiology, Nutrition, and Metabolism* (2017). [DOI: 10.1139/apnm-2016-0456](https://doi.org/10.1139/apnm-2016-0456)

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