

Order of workout routines to maximize benefits ^[1]

1) Hi Alice,

I've worked out in the gym for almost 10 years and I have noticed something that bothers me: Most people start their workout with their aerobics routine rather than their power routine. As far as I know, the body uses carbohydrates first, then gets to the fat only after finishing its carbohydrates, and that's why I assumed that it is much better to start with the power routine (after a proper aerobic warm-up) and only then get to the aerobic part. Am I right? And what is the exact explanation for that?

2) Alice,

Actually, there might be a reason for doing weights first and cardio later: lifting weights needs a lot of free energy, in the form of carbohydrates. The cardio training would consume a lot of these, to the point where you would have very few reserves. So, if you do cardio first, you might not be able to lift as much weight, therefore compromising your workout. Besides, since the goal of cardio many times is to burn fat, it's better to give a "kick in" lifting weights — burning some of your sugars — so that when moving to cardio, you start to burn fat earlier on during the exercise. Or is it?

3) Hi Alice,

My husband and I both go to the gym together. He goes to build muscle, I go to trim my weight and tone up. We normally only lift weights, as he does not like to do cardio because he thinks it will make him lose weight, and he needs to gain rather than lose (he is very skinny). Is it true that if he does 20 - 30 minutes of cardio per day, along with 45 minutes - 1 hour of weight training 4-days-a-week, he will lose weight? THANKS!

Answer

Dear Readers,

With the variety of popular fitness routines out there, it's no wonder there's confusion about the proper regimen! Rather than avoiding cardio or weight training entirely, those looking to reach a specific goal, such as weight gain, weight loss, or toning, may choose to do one before the other

to maximize their efforts. Additionally, Reader 3, whether or not a person will gain or lose weight may also be determined by additional lifestyle habits, such as what they eat, [how much they sleep](#) [2], and their stress levels. Whether beginning with cardio or strength training, the body will begin to burn calories from carbohydrates first and start burning calories from fat later. Ultimately, a well-balanced physical activity plan, including both cardio and strength training, regardless of order, has benefits for overall health and fitness.

As for calorie burning and weight loss, Readers 1 and 2, you were both correct in stating that the body starts burning calories from carbohydrates and then draws on fat stores. Carbohydrates are pulled from blood glucose or stored glycogen, while fat can be used through the breakdown of fatty acids. Generally, the body doesn't tap into stored fat as an energy source unless it needs a backup after using carbohydrates. However, because carbs average four calories of energy per gram, while fat averages about nine, it takes longer to burn fat but is more effective in weight loss. It's also good to consider the energy needs based on an individual's fitness goals; talking with a dietitian about your fitness goals can help ensure you're getting the proper fuel for your body.

When deciding on the order of activities, whether cardio or strength is more beneficial when done first depends on the desired end result. Individuals who want to focus on building muscle or gaining mass may better utilize glycogen if they do strength training exercises first. Building muscle strength and mass requires high amounts of energy in a short period of time to produce enough force to break down muscle. Engaging in cardiovascular activity before lifting weights may deplete the body of these stores, leaving less energy for strength training. Reader 3, this may be something you recommend for your husband so he's able to fully benefit from the strength training, while still getting aerobic activity. It's also worth noting that strength training can boost the body's metabolism, leading to more fat burning during cardio exercises afterwards. On the other hand, individuals who have specific cardio goals, such as a long-distance run, increasing their cardiovascular health, or slimming their body, may want to do cardio first in order to focus on adapting their body to a higher intensity aerobic workout and improving their endurance. Performing strength training exercises first may not leave enough energy to then focus on the cardiovascular goals. That being said, regardless of the goal, engaging in both forms of activity are beneficial to the overall health of the body.

Bottom line — the most efficient order of cardio and strength training is dependent on each person's individual goals for physical activity. Additionally, the lifestyle behaviors they engage in outside of their physical activity regimen can also contribute to their success in meeting these goals. Those interested in more personalized recommendations focused on specific goals may consider talking with a certified personal trainer at a fitness center or with a health care provider. You can also add a little further to your reading by checking out other Q&As in the [Nutrition & Physical Activity](#) [3] section of the *Go Ask Alice!* archives.

Here's to sweating from, not about, your new routine!

Alice!

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