

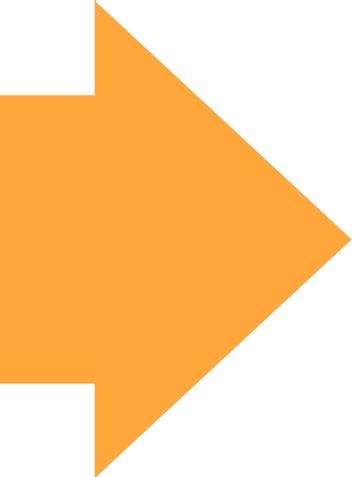
**True**

OR

**False?**

**11** Common  
Fitness  
Beliefs  
**Explained**





# New gym myths

seem to pop up overnight. Some hang around because they're appealing: Eat all the carbs you want before a 5K! Others because they sound true: Strength training makes you bulky!

It's hard to fault people for buying in to these maxims. "Everyone is looking for the secret to what works. So they're ready to jump on the next bandwagon because maybe it's the answer," explains personal trainer and author [Rachel Cosgrove](#).

It's time to set the record straight. What follows are 11 of the most pervasive gym legends out there. Some are true, some are false, and some fall somewhere in between.

So the next time someone tells you that running will wreck your knees, that gain requires pain, or that you can't be healthy if you're a size 16, you'll not only know if what they're saying is true — you'll also know why.



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TRUE or FALSE?

# Machines are safer than free weights.

**TRUE.** But free weights are still the better option.

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Resistance-training machines like the leg press, leg extension, and lat pull-down might look like medieval torture devices, but it's actually the benign-looking barbells and dumbbells that cause the most weight-training injuries.

This doesn't mean you should banish them from your workouts. The key is learning proper form. Consult with a trainer or certified coach, start light, and be patient with yourself as you try new moves with new tools.

While machines provide a measure of safety, free weights offer their own benefits. A 2014 study found that six sets of barbell squats stimulated significantly more beneficial hormones than the same number of machine leg presses. And, since free weights force you to control a weight in all directions, they also teach better movement mechanics and body awareness, says Alex Hutchinson, PhD, author of [\*Which Comes First, Cardio or Weights?\*](#)



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TRUE or FALSE?

# You don't have to be "thin" to be healthy.

**TRUE.** Body fat is just one measure of health — and not a very accurate one.

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It's a misconception that thinness equates to glowing health. In truth, it's quite possible to carry some extra weight and still be healthy.

"A person who has more body fat but less stress and who sleeps well, lifts weights a couple days a week, and eats vegetables and fruits is often healthier than someone with low body fat who doesn't have the same healthy habits," explains Cosgrove.

"Body fat is only one measure of health. It's also important to have strength, flexibility, cardiovascular health, and healthy hormonal levels," she continues. And those factors are influenced as much or more by what you do than what you weigh.



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TRUE or FALSE?

# Running is bad for your knees.

**FALSE.** Bad running form is bad for your knees.

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Perfect running form should be painless, says Andy Galpin, PhD, CSCS, an exercise physiologist at California State University, Fullerton. “The human body developed to move far more than we do now. Historically, if a person couldn’t handle 20, 30, or 40 miles of running per week, he’d starve.”

These days, many people jump into the sport too quickly and too intensely after years of sedentary living. The solution, says Galpin, is to take it slow and focus on form: “Your knee should track over your foot, not inside or outside of it. Your toes should track forward, not in or out. And you should feel equal pressure on the inside and outside edges of your foot each time you stride.”

And strive for quality over quantity: Fewer miles of pain-free running with spot-on form is much better than more miles of painful running with sloppy form. To progress, says Galpin, “don’t increase your mileage by more than 10 percent per week.”



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TRUE or FALSE?

# You need to load up on carbs before a race.

**FALSE.** Eat a balanced meal before a race.

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To budding endurance athletes, carb loading may sound like a dream come true: Sign up for a 5K and you have carte blanche to scarf pasta, doughnuts, and candy for 24 hours prior to the event.

It's true that aerobic activities like distance running, cycling, and swimming are fueled by a combination of carbohydrates and fat. In practice, though, even a long race doesn't burn nearly as many carbs as you might think. Unless you're going to be racing for more than four hours, says Adam Chase, coauthor of *The Ultimate Guide to Trail Running*, a normal-size meal, balanced in protein and fats, and high in easily digested carbs (he recommends dark grains like quinoa and brown rice rather than white flour), is sufficient.

Take in much more than that and the extra energy will wind up right where extra calories go any other day of the week — around your middle.



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TRUE or FALSE?

# Exercise makes you smarter.

**TRUE.** Working out has many positive effects on the brain.

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Science has proven it: What's good for the body is also good for the brain.

Jeff Rosga, NASM-CPT, NASM-PES, senior director of Life Time Academy in Chanhassen, Minn., notes that regular aerobic exercise boosts the size of the hippocampus, the part of the brain responsible for memory and learning. In older people, lifting weights and brisk walking improve spatial memory.

Exercise also stimulates the release of growth factors — substances that enhance neuroplasticity by promoting the formation of new neural pathways, brain cells, and blood vessels.

Exercise also initiates head-to-toe changes in body chemistry — decreasing inflammation and stress while improving digestion and sleep — all of which support a healthy, thriving brain.



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TRUE or FALSE?

## Fasting before exercise burns more fat.

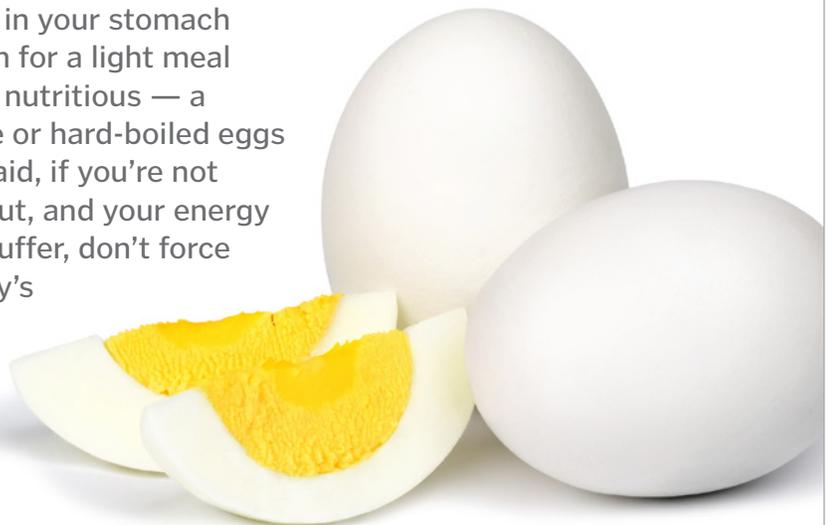
**FALSE.** Exercising after a small meal may burn more fat than a fasted workout.

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It seems to make sense: Without food in your belly, your body draws energy from the fat on your belly — right?

In practice, though, it doesn't work like that. A 2014 study found that women on a customized nutrition plan who performed aerobic exercise after an overnight fast lost no more fat than a second group who had a meal before their morning cardio sessions. Another study suggests that eating a small meal before a moderately intense exercise session may lead to greater excess postexercise oxygen consumption, or EPOC (the bump in your metabolic rate that happens in the hours following a workout) than eating nothing at all.

So if losing fat is your goal, research shows it's worth having something in your stomach before your workout. Aim for a light meal that's easy to digest and nutritious — a protein-packed smoothie or hard-boiled eggs are good options. That said, if you're not hungry before working out, and your energy and performance don't suffer, don't force yourself to eat. Your body's intuition may be more useful than studies or fads.



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TRUE or FALSE?

# Squatting and deadlifting are bad for your back.

**FALSE.** Smart exercise techniques mitigate the risk of these strength-training essentials.

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You probably know someone who's tweaked his or her back while squatting or deadlifting. (That someone may even be you.) Some gym-goers become so gun-shy of these key exercises that they swear off them altogether.

The problem isn't with the exercises, though — it's the way people perform them, says Mike Robertson, MS, CSCS, USAW, president of Robertson Training Systems in Indianapolis.

To ensure that your form stays on point while you push your limits on the squat and deadlift, says Robertson, try this: Exhale fully, pulling your front ribs down. Simultaneously tilt the top of your pelvis back slightly, as if tucking an imaginary tail between your legs. "Now hold this posture and take a breath in," he says. "You should feel air go into the front, sides, and back of your core." Hold that position throughout your set.

Can't hold that position? Back off the weight, or try an easier version of the lift: Place the weight on a 4-inch platform when you deadlift, or perform a three-quarter or half-squat version instead.



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TRUE or FALSE?

# Walking improves bone density.

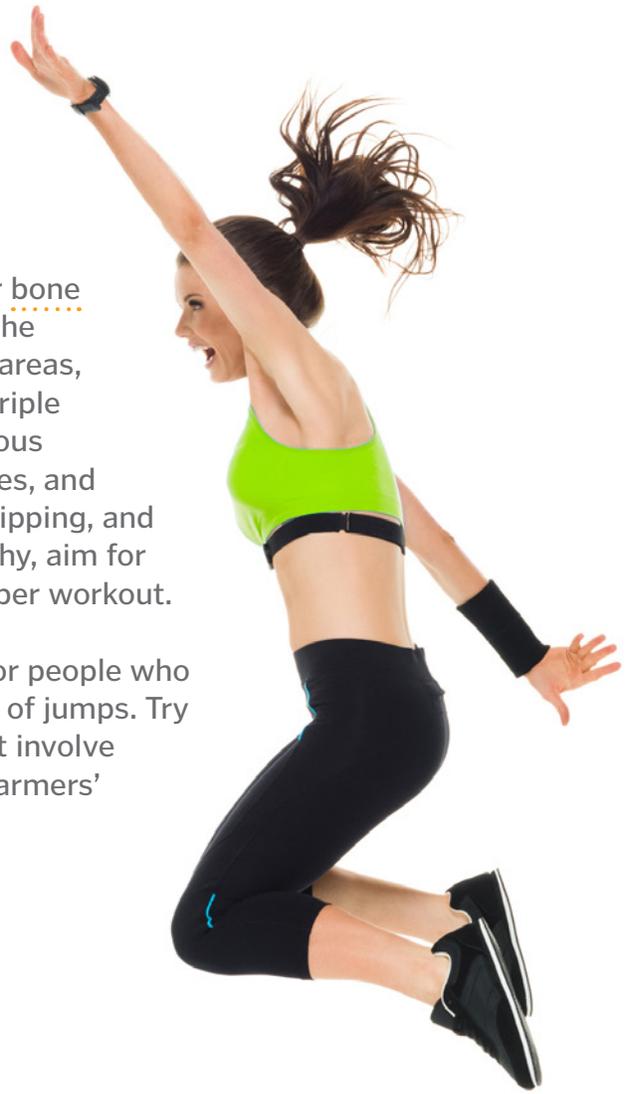
**TRUE.** But you'll build it faster if you hop, skip, and jump.

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While walking is good, it isn't your best or most time-efficient choice. Luckily, says Galpin, weight-bearing activity can help stave off bone loss.

"In the elderly, the areas most vulnerable to osteoporosis — or bone loss — are the hips and pelvis," he explains. To shore up those key areas, your most effective weapon is triple extension: explosive, simultaneous straightening of the ankles, knees, and hips. Think running, jumping, skipping, and hopping. If your bones are healthy, aim for about 40 jumps, skips, or hops per workout.

Strength training is also great for people who aren't ready for the high impact of jumps. Try weight-bearing movements that involve standing and walking, such as farmers' walks, squats, and deadlifts.



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TRUE or FALSE?

# Lifting weights makes you bulky.

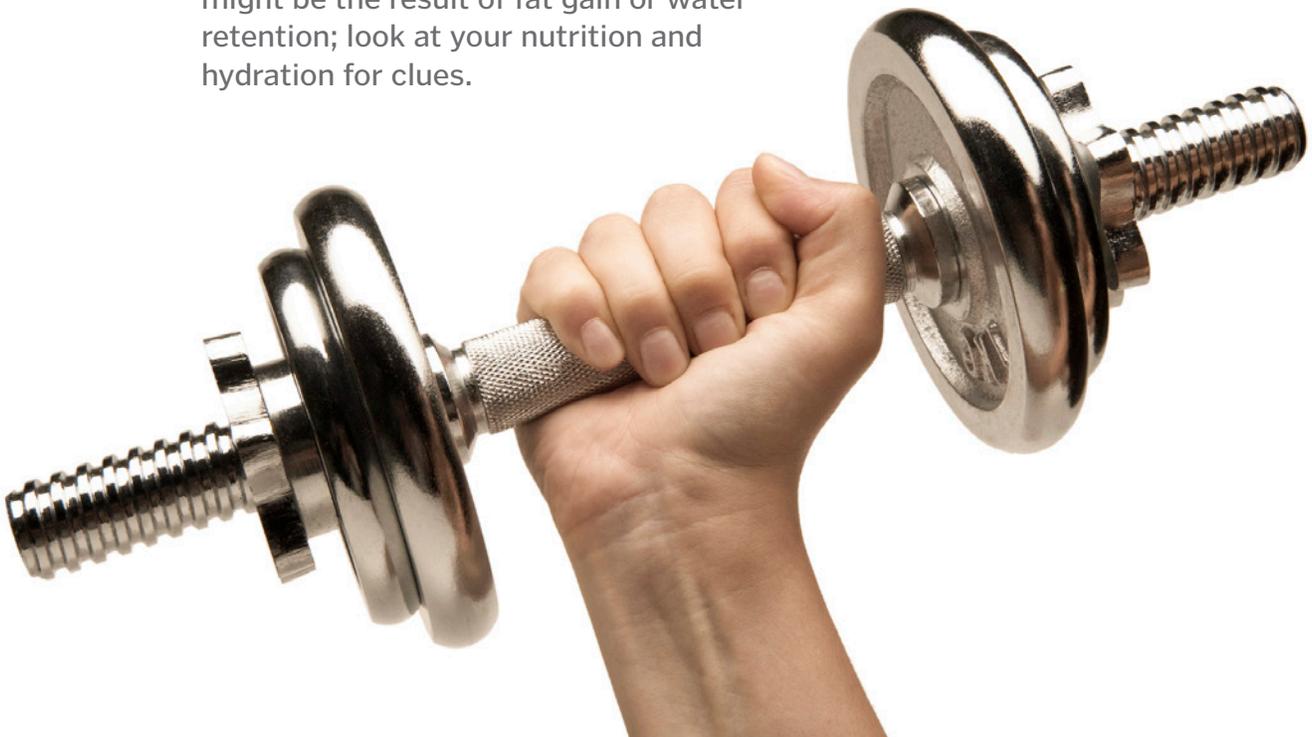
**FALSE.** Lifting weights makes you healthy and strong.

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This is one of the more stubborn myths surrounding the practice of strength training — that anyone, male or female, who hefts a pair of dumbbells will transform into an Incredible Hulk.

That's akin to believing that playing a few scales on a piano will turn you into Elton John. No one ever gained an appreciable amount of muscle mass without years of hard work in the gym and a devotion to a muscle-building diet. Most people's muscles will get slightly larger on a strength-training program, but "bulk" is not something that happens by accident.

Gaining more muscle than that is the exception, not the norm. If you gain more, or start feeling "bulkier" than you prefer, it might be the result of fat gain or water retention; look at your nutrition and hydration for clues.



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TRUE or FALSE?

# Pain is weakness leaving the body.

**FALSE.** Some soreness is normal when you exercise, but true pain is a warning sign that something is wrong.

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A bout of hard exercise is not 100 percent comfortable. And a little muscle soreness a day or two after a gym session is normal, especially when you're performing new tasks and exercises or after a particularly tough workout.

But stabbing pain in your back or joints? Pain that affects the way you walk, move, or play your sport? That's another thing altogether, and it's wise not to write off any of those symptoms as the hallmark of a good workout — or to wear them as a badge of honor.

Real pain is “an indicator light directing your attention to something important,” says Kate Galliett, NASM-PES, creator of The Unbreakable Body program. “What matters is that you identify the pain and use it to enhance your path forward.”



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TRUE or FALSE?

# You can stay fit — or even get fitter — as you age.

**TRUE.** You can take charge of your body's aging process.

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Some of the effects of aging are tough to avoid. The cardiovascular system loses efficiency; muscles and bones get weaker; memory and sex drive all decline.

But how quickly these vital capacities drop off is largely up to you. A 2008 study published in the *Journal of Physiology* revealed that by training consistently, older athletes are able to keep pace with all but the most elite of their younger competition. Another study found that exercise, especially in middle age, can influence telomere length, a measure of a cell's capacity to function, and an important marker for longevity.

As you age, your health and vitality are dictated as much or more by lifestyle choices, such as what you eat, how you sleep, and how you move, as they are by genetics.

“Don't get obsessed with trying to preserve your 25-year-old perfection,” says Hutchinson. “But you don't have to accept that you will spend more time in the rocking chair with each passing year either.”

