

Weight-loss Surgery and Fitness

The Do's and Don'ts for a Successful Exercise Program

By Julia Karlstad, MEd, CSCS

If you're considering weight-loss surgery or have already had weight-loss surgery, your commitment to adopting a physically active lifestyle along with sustaining healthy eating habits are critical to your long-term success.

Having worked with hundreds of weight-loss surgery clientele, I have seen some phenomenal success stories and I can say without hesitation that the successful weight-loss surgery patient has incorporated regular exercise into their daily lives. The important thing for you to recognize is how to exercise in order to compliment your weight-loss efforts and in turn sustain your fitness regimen injury free!

Combating Excess Body Weight

Excess body weight often restricts your ability to be physically active and it is important for you to understand how to work around these mobility limitations. The excess body weight as a whole is the biggest obstacle when determining an appropriate exercise program. Weight-loss will always be your number one objective initially since decreasing weight allows more mobility

and puts less stress on your joints. Not to mention, the number one reason you had weight-loss surgery was to lose weight and increase your health, thus your exercise program should complement the effects of the surgery.

If you are an obese person or a fitness professional working with an obese client (body mass index greater than 30) follow these physical activity recommendations:

- Increase daily activity. For example, wash the dishes by hand, clean the house, park further away, try using the stairs, etc.
- Start slow and gradually progress until you're exercising 60 minutes a day, six days/week.
- If your BMI is greater than 35, make every effort to avoid exercises that would create greater stress on your joints. Avoid activities such as jogging, jumping and competitive contact sports.
- Do aerobic exercise that is low to moderate in intensity. This is best for weight-loss.
- Emphasize duration over intensity in your exercise.
- Select a modality of exercise that works around any physical or medical limitation.

DISCLAIMER: To develop an exercise program that best suits your needs, please consult with your physician. It is important to talk with your doctor before beginning any exercise program.

- Strength training should consist of two to three sets of 12-15 repetitions. Use light to moderately heavy weights. The goal is to maintain your lean muscle through the weight-loss phase, not to bulk up.
- Focus on doing a total body strength training workout. Strength train anywhere from one to three times per week (a minimum of once per week), and be sure to leave at least 48 hours between strength training sessions.
- Always remember that joint pain is not healthy pain. If the exercise causes pain, modify the exercise to alleviate the pain.
- If you have major joint limitations in your lower extremities, try to perform most of your strength exercises from a seated position.
- Always change up your exercise routine (i.e., flexibility, cardio and strength training) every four to six weeks.



Emergence of the “Bariathlete”

By Lea Crosetti, RD

Bariathlete: people who have lost weight via bariatric surgery and are now competing in endurance events such as marathons, Ironmans, ultramans, Xterra races, centuries and much more.

A new population is emerging, known as “bariathletes.” Because bariatric surgery provides access to moving more freely without weight-bearing pain, it allows people to act on the opportunities to make vital lifestyle changes. It’s like having a clean slate to work with (so to say).

Bariathletes get to choose to live into a life that may not have been possible without getting the weight off. Being thin isn’t necessarily the objective of the surgery; it is being healthy and active and taking care of our bodies, so we can have vitality and zest for life.

Most new post-ops can’t even begin to imagine running a marathon or competing in a triathlon right after surgery. Obviously, it takes time for anyone to train for such events and it all has to start somewhere. First and foremost, you need to participate in physical activities you truly enjoy. How are you suppose to do something life long if you hate it? You won’t do it. For many, exercise has become a form of punishment, whether it’s for eating a little extra or if the scale read slightly higher than the previous day.

Although exercise can be used to help manage our weight, weight-loss should not be the sole purpose of exercise. When people participate in activities they like, they are more inclined to continue with them and as a result improve their fitness levels and athletic abilities.

Having goals set up around fitness can help people stay motivated and enjoy a sense of accomplishment about reaching those goals. Racing or competing is not everyone’s passion, but people often want to contribute to others or support greater causes. Many bariathletes have chosen not to become competitive, but rather they take part in walks, such as the Susan G. Komen 3 Day Walk or the ASMB Foundation and OAC’s *Walk from Obesity*, and raise money for organizations to fight cancer, diabetes, obesity, arthritis and other disease states, and that always feels good!

Bariathlete Nutrition

Sport-specific training occurs on a whole new level when advancing into the realm of competition. Choosing a race and working with a coach or trainer to design a program is highly recommended. Training requires sports specificity

Exercise Guidelines for Each Stage of Weight-loss Surgery

The best thing a weight-loss surgery candidate can do to prepare themselves for both before and after surgery is to increase their level of fitness. The better cardiovascular condition before surgery, the fewer complications they’ll experience during and after surgery. The following guidelines should prove helpful:

Preoperative Stage

- Make weight-loss a primary goal of your exercise program. Excess fat can make the weight-loss surgery operation itself more challenging. In fact, most surgeons require that their patient lose a certain amount of weight before they will operate.
- Focus on cardiovascular exercise to improve heart health, decrease body weight and help lose body fat before surgery.
- Follow the exercise guidelines discussed above.

Post-operative Stage

If there are any postoperative complications, that is physical problems following the weight-loss surgery, schedule an appointment with your bariatric surgeon and follow the surgeon’s recommendations for an



exercise program. For the first four weeks after surgery, focus on flexibility exercises, deep breathing and getting back into performing normal daily activities.

Gradually incorporate low-intensity aerobic exercise (i.e. walking, biking or swimming). If the surgery was laparoscopic, it is generally safe to start exercising up to your pain threshold two weeks after surgery, but it is best to consult with your surgeon before starting any exercise program. If the surgery was “open,” it may take a few more weeks to recover. Here are some tips for those that underwent “open” procedures:

- During the first six weeks after surgery, do not lift any more than 15 lbs; otherwise, exercise up to pain threshold.
- Avoid abdominal exercises for the first eight to 12 weeks (allow the incision to heal). This helps alleviate abdominal hernias near or around the incision.
- Significantly reduce caloric intake. During the first few weeks to months after surgery, patients should consume less than 500 calories a day (the surgeon will give specific instructions). This significant decrease in calories may initially cause some fatigue. Therefore, do not perform high-intensity exercise. As weight is lost and the level of fitness is improved, you will be able to take in a few more calories as well as exercise at higher levels of intensity. Follow the surgeon’s dietary recommendations.

Caloric Intake

The bariatric surgeon may increase the caloric intake to 1,200-1,400 calories six to 12 months after surgery, particularly if their patient has lost a large percentage of their excess weight. Follow the surgeon’s and/or dietitian’s recommendations on food intake. Regularly monitor and assess your exercise program to ensure continued compliance and continued weight-loss which ultimately leads to weight maintenance.

Conclusion

A lifelong exercise program is critical to a weight-loss surgery patient’s long-term success. Bariatric surgery is a valuable tool for rapid weight-loss; however, in two to three years, if a physically active lifestyle has not been adopted, the weight returns.

Exercise is insurance for long-term weight-loss. If you can stick to this advice, you’ll be at a healthy weight and in good physical condition for years after your weight-loss surgery.

About the Author:

Julia Karlstad, MEd, CSCS, is the president of JKFITNESS, LLC. Julia has worked in the fitness industry and specifically the medical wellness community for several years. Previous to owning her own business, Julia personally developed and directed an exercise physiology program that consisted of two bariatric hospitals and three medically supervised weight-loss clinics. For more information on Julia, please visit www.juliakarlstad.com or www.jk-fit.com.

and periodized workouts to prevent injury and maximize performance. In addition, this transition poses a challenge when fueling a bariathelete’s new body.

Which guidelines should a bariathelete follow; bariatric or sports nutrition? The answer is neither. How can you “eat like an athlete” when you have a one ounce stomach? As you can see, running out of energy and dealing with gastrointestinal distress can be a major concern. This population who is competing in endurance events has an entirely different set of nutritional guidelines. For this group of athletes, it is highly recommended to work with a dietitian who specializes in bariathelete nutrition.

Using bariatric surgery as a tool to get the weight off can open up the doors to a whole new life. Creating a life full of adventures and participating in activities you love to do on a daily basis will be the key to long-term success. With the weight off, it allows for people to dream of possibilities they couldn’t even consider before. If those dreams or endeavors have you inspired to register for a race, then I recommend creating a support team of a coach and bariathelete dietitian. Remember to gradually build your endurance and strength as well as to vary your activities to establish your fitness foundation. Good luck, have fun and play!

About the Author:

Lea Crosetti, RD, is a triathlete, registered dietitian and the founder of BariAthletes and Food Coach For You. She received her bachelor’s degree in dietetics from the University of Hawaii at Manoa and is currently working on her master’s degree in exercise physiology at California State University Northridge. Combining her bariatric expertise with her sports nutrition background, Lea has an in depth understanding of how to fuel the body for endurance events after bariatric surgery.

Modification of Exercise

Several exercises may need to be modified in order to work around the excess weight and any other physical or medical limitations. Here are just a few ideas of how to modify an exercise:



Modified Quadriceps Stretch



Seated Leg Lift



Modified Push-up



Knee Taps



Seated Hamstrings Stretch

Photos provided by the author.



ABOUT THE OBESITY ACTION COALITION (OAC)

The Obesity Action Coalition (OAC) is a National non-profit organization dedicated to giving a voice to individuals affected by obesity and helping them along their journey toward better health. Our core focuses are to elevate the conversation of weight and its impact on health, improve access to obesity care, provide science-based education on obesity and its treatments, and fight to eliminate weight bias and discrimination.



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The OAC knows that the journey with weight can be challenging but we also know that great things happen when we learn, connect and engage. That is why the OAC Community exists. Our Community is designed to provide quality education, ongoing support programs, an opportunity to connect, and a place to take action on important issues.

Through the OAC Community, you can get access to:

- Weight & Health Education • Community Blogs
 - Community Discussion Forum
 - Ongoing Support • Meaningful Connections
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