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‘Primal Fitness’ Tips That Can Transform Your Health

Dr. Mercola | February 4th, 2018

The secret to lifelong health and peak performance is modeling the lifestyle behaviors of our hunter gatherer ancestors — the so-called Paleolithic approach. Mark Sisson, founder of the popular website Mark’s Daily Apple and a leader in the paleo movement, was one of the first to help me understand the importance of burning fat for fuel.

Mark is an accomplished elite athlete, and has been featured on the cover of Runner’s World Magazine three times. In the past, it was widely believed that the more aerobic activity (such as long-distance running) you did, the better it was for your heart. The aerobic trend — which captured both Mark and me — was largely catalyzed by Dr. Kenneth Cooper’s book “Aerobics,” published in 1968.

In more recent years, fitness researchers have largely demolished this idea, showing this kind of exercise may actually do more harm than good, especially to your heart, and that intense but short, intermittent bursts of exercise are not only safer but actually far more effective.

Fit as a Fiddle, Yet Falling Apart

Mark became an accomplished runner early in life, placing fifth in the U.S. National Championships in 1980. He also qualified for the Olympic trials marathon that same year. When overtraining led to injury, he transitioned over to triathlons, and for a couple of years was one of the top triathletes in the U.S., placing fourth at Iron Man in Hawaii in 1982. At that point, his body had taken a significant beating, not just from overtraining but also from excess carbohydrate consumption.

“I was so beat up from the diet that was required to fuel all those miles,” he says. [W]hen Robert Haas’s book ‘Eat to Win’ came out ... it was all about the carbohydrates. There wasn’t a carbohydrate I did not love and slam down, from pizza and pasta to beer and cakes. I was falling apart.

I was a picture of fitness on the outside ... but on the inside, I had arthritis, I had tendonitis throughout my body, I had overuse injuries, I had irritable bowel syndrome that ran my life. I had upper respiratory tract infections six or eight times a year. It was like, ‘Wait a minute. Cooper said I was going to be healthy doing all this stuff, and now I’m literally falling apart.’

I retired ... I was over all the pain and suffering I was putting myself through, just to be

able to say I won a medal at a race, and 'Oh by the way, I'm still not very healthy,' and dedicated the rest of my life to researching ways in which to be strong and lean and fit and healthy with the least amount of pain, suffering, sacrifice, discipline, calorie counting, portion control, and all that other stuff that we talk about."

What Does It Take to Get Fit?

All of that research and experimentation eventually resulted in the creation of Mark's Daily Apple, along with eight books on fitness and diet, starting with "The Primal Blueprint." Today, Mark favors fitness routines that mimic ancestral movement patterns, such as high-intensity interval training. Ultimate Frisbee is a favorite pastime, as is paddle boarding. Mark also stresses the importance of exercise recovery, saying:

"If you're into this for the performance, then you must of necessity recognize that the less time you spend injured, the better ... You must recognize that it is the rest period where all the gains come. The tendency is to ... over train in endurance activities ..."

I put in over 100 miles a week for seven years ... [T]he endorphin rush — that true runner's high that people get — it exists. It is a morphine-like substance your body produces. Unfortunately, it's because your body thinks you're killing yourself that it produces this.

[So] be very specific about what it is you're trying to accomplish. If you want to build aerobic capacity, you don't do that by running your heart rate at 80 to 85 percent of your max every single day ... If you want to build aerobic capacity, you have to be good at burning fat, which means lower level aerobic activity ...

A heart rate of 180 minus your age would be your maximum heart rate for training in the aerobic zone, which is much lower than people assumed even 10 years ago, let alone 20 or 30 years ago when I was running ...

[T]hat's the [heart] rate at which you burn the most amount of fat and tap into your glycogen the least. To develop that scale of burning fat aerobically, you have to keep a limit on it for a while, while the body increases the mitochondria, increases the capillary profusion to feed the mitochondria. That's one of the things that I would really [advise you to] pay attention to ...

[Y]ou wouldn't go to the gym and do 300 sets of 50 pound curls every single day just because you wanted bigger biceps. You recognize you have to give your arms rest [and recovery].

That same principle applies to the cardiac muscle ... I wrote a book called 'Primal Endurance,' which is about how to train for endurance activities; understanding the physiology of the cardiac muscle and mitochondria and so on, and taking advantage of the methods that are optimal for achieving an increase in performance."

The Importance of Strength Training

At 65 years of age, Mark is formidably fit with a physique far younger men would envy. He's a living

testament to the fact that his strategies work, and they do not include long-distance running. In fact, he stopped running altogether 15 years ago.

“I weigh 28 pounds more now than when I was a runner,” he says. “I have the same body fat level; I just have more muscle mass, because I only lift [weights] and I only sprint.” In other words, he converted from being a predominantly endurance athlete to a predominantly strength and speed athlete, and his physique reflects this.

“The issue for people as they age isn't a loss of aerobic capacity, it's a loss of metabolic capacity and metabolic flexibility that comes with lean muscle mass. The best thing that somebody over 45 can do is start lifting weights rather than choosing to run. Ideally, you do both, but the standard incremental loss of aerobic capacity on a year to year basis after the age of 35 is 1 percent a year.

The standard loss of strength is 2 percent a year if you don't do anything about it. You have much more to lose if you don't work out in terms of losing vital capacity ... People don't really die of old age. They die of organ failure ...

When you build muscle ... the fact that you're doing the work causes your heart to pump harder, causes your lungs to breathe in more fully ... causes your liver to create more substrate and clear more toxins, causes all of these other organs to have to function to keep up with the demands of having this metabolically challenging tissue that is burning calories.

To the extent that you maintain that muscle mass and maintain some mobility, your bones stay stronger, your heart stays stronger, your lungs stay stronger. Conversely, if you stop, atrophy sets in.”

Mark's Fitness Regimen

As for his own fitness regimen, Mark:

- Goes to the gym twice a week, where he does bodyweight exercises such as pullups, pushups, dips, squats and lunges.
- Rides on a stationary bike once a week for 30 to 40 minutes, maintaining his max heart rate of 115 (180 minus 65).
- Plays Ultimate Frisbee once a week for two hours, which he calls “the highlight” of his week. He’s been doing it for 14 years. “It's the greatest game ever invented,” he says. “Any school that lost their funding for PE, if they could invest \$10 in a Frisbee and have a grassy place, it's the perfect game and learning experience for any kid in terms of camaraderie, sportsmanship and ... hand-eye coordination.”

You're also moving and reaching your body in all directions, which only becomes more important with age. If you're interested in giving this a go, do an online search for “Ultimate Frisbee groups” in your local area, or start your own group. “It's just running and catching. It's easy to learn, and it's fun to play at all levels,” Mark says.

- Does cold thermogenesis on a nightly basis. After soaking in his Jacuzzi, he'll spend about two minutes in his pool where the water temperature is in the high 40s to low 50s. He does this just before bedtime, which helps him "sleep like a baby."

Maintaining Mobility Is Key for Healthy Aging

Maintaining your mobility is of paramount importance as you age. When you lose your ability to move around unaided, it's all downhill from there. Tai Chi and Qigong can be particularly helpful if you're elderly and cannot run around catching Frisbees. Mark also recommends collagen supplementation to keep your tendons, ligaments, cartilage and joints strong and supple. "It's all the stuff that doesn't have a blood supply that we don't necessarily feed well," he says.

"We don't give the body the raw materials to rebuild from a stressful event. I've become the world's biggest fan of collagen supplementation. I do 20 to 30 grams a day." Bear in mind that many collagen supplements are sourced from animals raised in concentrated animal feeding operations, which raises the likelihood of it containing unwanted contaminants, so make sure the product you're buying is certified organic and grass fed.

Like me, he's also a proponent of exercising in a fasted state, but on days when he's doing a strenuous weight-bearing workout, he will take a collagen supplement beforehand.

"What we're trying to do when we're fasted is to go into that workout promoting fat burning. The main thing we're trying to do, especially if we're doing a hard workout in the gym, is to increase human growth hormone and testosterone ... That is what gets blunted by drinking a post-workout carbohydrate replenishment drink."

I do like to go into my workouts [fasted], and most of [the time] I don't take the supplement beforehand. If I'm going to do a bike ride, I don't need to do the supplement beforehand. If it's a lifting workout or ... a paddling workout where I'm really going to dig hard and stress my shoulders, I want to have those peptides there for reconstruction — not for energy."

Healthy Lifestyle Basics

Oftentimes, some of the easiest, most basic lifestyle strategies are the most powerful. Two of Mark's top tips include optimizing your vitamin D and intermittently fasting. Aside from drinking a cup of black coffee in the morning, Mark eats just two meals a day, between 1 and 7 p.m. "It's uncanny how little food it takes to keep me thriving," he says. "That's been my biggest epiphany over the past five years."

Indeed, most people simply eat too much, and too often, and an overriding reason for this is because they've lost the metabolic flexibility to efficiently burn fat for fuel, and are running on carbs all the time. Since carbohydrates burn much faster than fat, you have to continuously keep eating. As noted by Mark:

"When you achieve this metabolic flexibility [of being able to burn fat for fuel], which is the end goal of any true beneficial eating strategy ... you can extract energy from any substrate that's available. It could be fat on your plate, it could be fat on your body. Could

be carbohydrates on your plate, could be glycogen in your muscles. Could be glucose in your bloodstream. Could be ketones produced by your liver.

As a last resort, it could be amino acids because there's nothing left, but you can combust those as well. When you become truly metabolically flexible, then your body has this increased ability to draw on, and never really run out of energy, and never really send a signal to the brain that says, 'We must eat.'

The end result of this metabolic flexibility — which comes largely from restricting carbohydrates and training your body to become really good at burning fat — you get more energy throughout the day and you don't get hungry ... If I do get a little bit hungry, my snack would be handful of macadamia nuts, or 2 tablespoons of coconut butter. It takes the edge off and I'm ready to go, no problem."

He also agrees with multiple day water fasting, which I now believe is one of the most profound metabolic interventions you can do to radically improve your health, as it allows your body to upregulate autophagy and mitophagy to remove damaged senescent cells in your body, including premalignant cells. It's also an extremely effective way to shed excess weight and extend your life span.