An Argument for Exercise

BY FERNANDO PAGÉS RUIZ



If building provides all the workout you need,

Although he didn't know it, 36-year-old Mario Lisak, a framer in Lincoln, Nebraska, could have been a poster boy for couch potatoes. Mario assumed that his active, on-the-job lifestyle of muscling tools and clambering up and down ladders kept him fit. He scoffed at exercise. But when a physical exam revealed 20 lb. of flab, high cholesterol and a touch of hypertension, the doctor delivered a warning: "Get fit or get sick."

Eight years ago, I had a similarly rude awakening, though the caveat came from my wife, not my doctor. Like Mario, I'd been a hands-on builder for much of my life; but when I got serious about my business, I put away my tools, picked up a briefcase and embraced a sedentary lifestyle. One night, though, I was getting another beer when I noticed that my wife had placed a new decoration on the refrigerator: a photo of a fellow in a swimsuit sporting one of the largest bellies I'd ever seen. I put down the beer when I realized it was me.

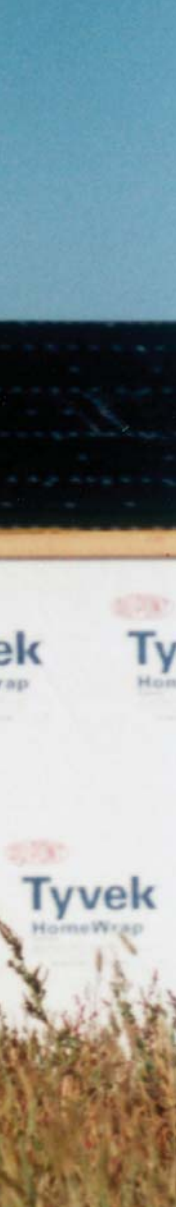
The next day, I followed my wife's advice and joined a health club. At first, I hated the treadmills and weight machines, especially whenever I glimpsed my jiggling silhouette in the mirror. But slowly, the promise of fitness began to seduce me. The workouts became more enjoyable, and the progress encouraged me. It took me a few years of hard work, but now at 47, I'm back down to my high-school weight and training for my second marathon.

You don't get exercise on the job

I didn't have a good excuse for getting out of shape; it happened out of laziness. But Mario thought that hard labor provided all the exercise he needed. After all, he turned in every night physically exhausted. Even the thought of running or pumping iron seemed daunting and unnecessary.

I've heard similar excuses from other tradespeople: "I work hard, so I don't need to work out." Unfortunately, that's not the case. Hammering, climbing and hauling lumber may be tiring, but they don't provide real exercise.

Exercise is physical activity specifically designed to promote fitness; it works your body systematically. Construction work expends energy, but in a limited, lopsided manner (photos facing page). Besides, unless you run up and down a ladder for 30 minutes nonstop, four days a week, construction work provides no cardiovascular benefits whatsoever.





I work hard. What do you mean I need to work out?

Although a physically active job is better for the body than a sedentary one, much building involves lopsided exertions that develop one side of the body at the expense of the other. Repetitive tasks such as hammering nails and carrying drywall promote muscular and skeletal imbalances that often lead to injury and back trouble. Bending over all day long is none too good either. A well-designed program of exercise counteracts these ill effects.





why does getting up in the morning hurt so much?

For builders who limit their daily physical exertion to fingering the cellular-phone pad and depressing the gas pedal, the picture looks even bleaker: According to the editors of *Men's Health* magazine, a quarter-million of us die every year from lack of exercise. If you're like me—boss and lackey all rolled into one—you can't afford achy joints, depleted energy and a feeble immune system. I think of exercise as cheap health insurance.

Exercise can delay the aging process

Getting out of shape doesn't happen all at once. It's a natural byproduct of aging and inactivity. In middle age, sedentary people lose a pound of muscle every year and replace it with a pound and a half of fat. We lose bone density and strength in connective tissues as well. Without exercise, we literally go the way of rotting lumber. But one preservative helps us to fight back: exercise.

With proper strength-training (weightlifting) exercise, you can hang on to every pound of muscle you ever had, and even add to it. With vigorous aerobic exercise (running, biking, swimming), you can burn off the blubber and enhance your ability to metabolize energy. And with flexibility training (stretching), you can keep your joints well oiled and pain-free.

Regaining fitness is a lot like rehabbing an old building. You soon discover that it's not just the paint that's peeling: It's the plaster, plumbing, wiring, framing and everything else that got old simultaneously.

But if you approach conditioning as you would a renovation project, with patience and a plan, the enormous scope of the project seems less daunting. You take one step at a time. Set a goal, make a plan, and then achieve that plan. With this attitude, rebuilding your body becomes less of a chore and more like learning a new craft. Soon, you will begin to see results and enjoy the fruits of your labor.

A good gym is the best place to start

Like every rebuilding project, getting in shape requires a few tools and some basic skills. You should get a building permit, too: your doctor's OK. You'll need a good pair of athletic shoes and some comfortable exercise

Photos this page: top left, Dan Thornton; bottom left, Tom O'Brien; right, Andy Beasley

IF YOU DEPEND ON YOUR BODY TO GET THE JOB DONE, YOU'VE GOT TO MAINTAIN IT PROPERLY

Whether you're a full-time builder or a weekend warrior, an exercise program that trains your body beyond the demands of the job makes you a more-efficient, safer worker. A well-rounded fitness program should include a variety of aerobic, strength-training and flexibility exercises.

Flexibility training (stretching)

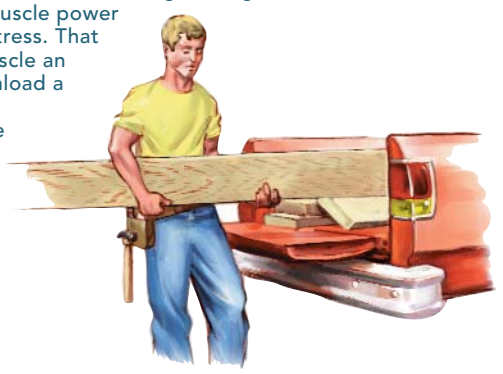
Stretching after lifting weights or in the middle of a strenuous workday ensures that muscles and connective tissues remain supple, and helps to repair the damage wrought by exercise and hard work. Flexibility training is actually the complement of strength training. Whereas strength-building exercises develop the muscles' power to contract, flexibility training develops their ability to relax.

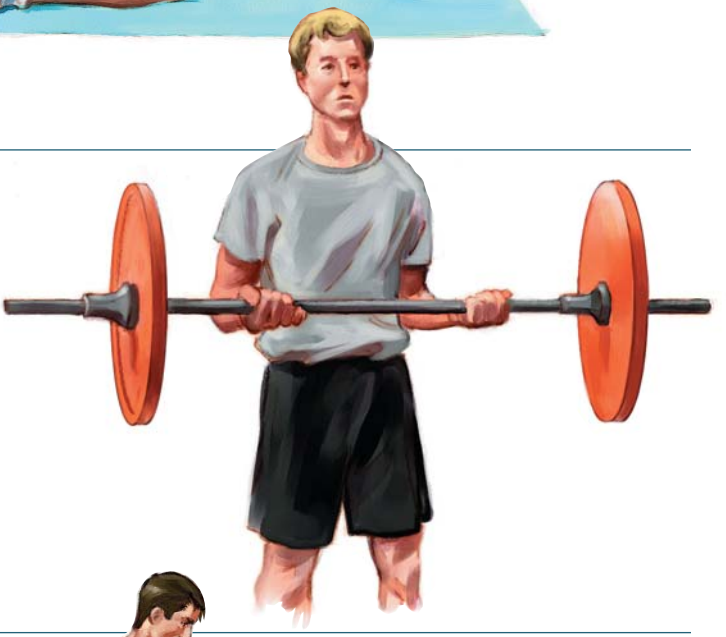




Strength training (weightlifting)

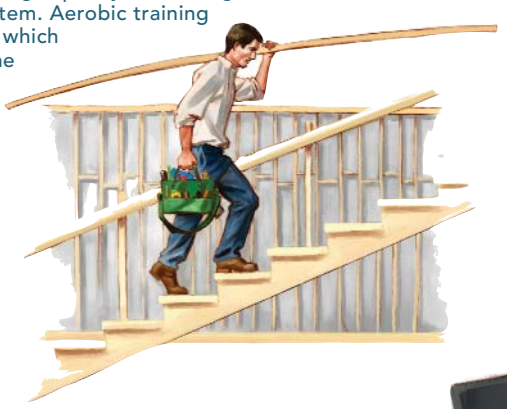
Instead of working at the limit of your capability, strength-building exercises such as weightlifting help you to develop muscle power that can handle high stress. That way, if you have to muscle an occasional girder or unload a flatbed full of drywall, you won't have trouble getting out of bed the next day.

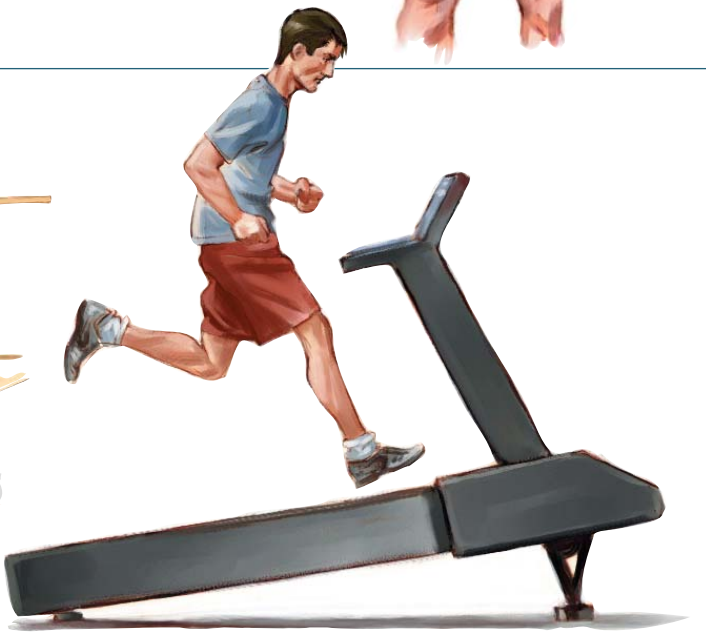




Aerobic training (endurance)

Running, swimming or riding a bike—any exercise that elevates breathing and heart rate for more than 20 minutes at a stretch more than three times per week—increases lung capacity and strengthens the cardiovascular system. Aerobic training builds endurance, which allows you to frame walls or go up and down stairs all day long without gasping for air.





Drawings: Matt Collins

clothes. If there's a decent gym nearby, I strongly recommend that you join it.

A friend asked me, "Why can't I just ride my bike and do a few push-ups at home?" I said, "The real question isn't 'Why can't you?' It's 'Why don't you?'" Most of us don't have the discipline to work out for an hour every day at home. We benefit from just showing up at the gym to spend an hour at a facility that is devoted to nothing but exercise. No bills to pay, no chores, no kids. Just you and the machines.

Problem is, if you don't know how to use all those machines, a gym can be daunting—sort of like dropping a banker in the middle of a job site and telling him to frame a set of stairs. I recommend starting out with a personal trainer (sidebar right). Although skilled trainers charge upward of $50 for an hourlong session, most gyms offer an introductory package for new members. At my gym, you get your first three sessions for $100, well worth the expense because the trainer will teach you how to use the equipment in the gym safely and effectively. Additionally, if your trainer has a nationally recognized certification, you can feel sure that he or she is qualified to develop a program that meets your goals and accommodates your current fitness level.

Regardless of whether you join a health club or hire a trainer, a balanced workout must involve a mix of aerobic training, strength training and flexibility training.

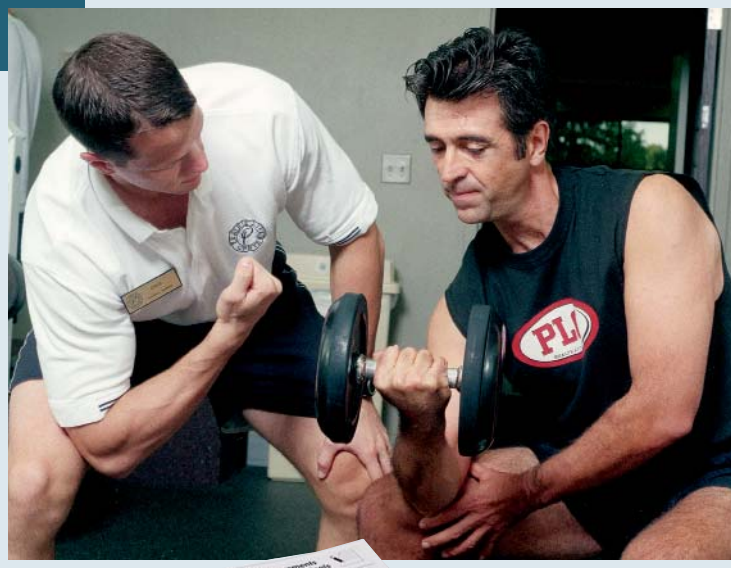
Aerobic training builds endurance

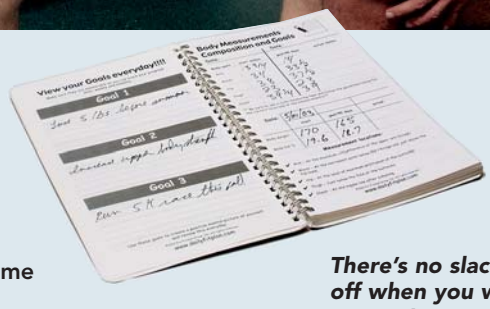
Run, swim or ride a bike—anything that increases heart rate and breathing—and you're burning calories aerobically. The calories you burn come from carbohydrates and fat, which is why your body responds to aerobics by shedding a few pounds. As you increase the intensity and duration of your aerobic workouts, you push back the threshold at which your body gets tired, too.

You can enhance conditioning just by increasing the demands on your body slightly. Go out for a walk every day, and soon you'll notice the difference. Pick up the pace and jog occasionally; it doesn't hurt to stomp on the accelerator pedal every once in a while and clear the fuel lines. Nothing is better for your heart than boosting the rpms. The more aerobic exercise you do, the more your heart and lungs will improve.

I started my aerobic training by jogging slowly for one block, then walking a block,

Personal trainers are not just for movie stars





There's no slacking off when you work out with a personal trainer. *In addition to teaching proper form, a personal trainer will motivate you to work harder than you might on your own. A skilled trainer is especially important as you advance into strenuous exercises like squats, which provide tremendous physiological benefits but require perfect form to execute safely.*

If you haven't seen the inside of a gym since high school, today's high-tech health club can be intimidating: You're confronted with a bewildering array of machines, weights and activities. How do you decide what's right for you? In my experience, the best way to learn how to exercise properly is to start with a personal trainer, one who's certified by a recognized agency like the American Council on Exercise (www.acefitness.org) or the National Strength and Conditioning Association (www.nsca-lift.org).

A good trainer will spend the time to evaluate your strengths and weaknesses and listen to your goals; then he or she will set up a program just for you. If you've developed muscular imbalances from years of pounding nails or digging ditches, for example, they might set you up with exercises that strengthen your weak-side muscles.

During each session, the trainer is there to provide coaching (photo above) so that you use good form, and spotting, so that you can push yourself harder without fear of injury. When lifting weights, for instance, it's at the threshold of maximum exertion that noticeable benefits really happen. Over the course of time, a good trainer will monitor your progress and modify your workouts as necessary to keep your body adapting to evolving stresses.

For non-movie stars like us who can't afford to work out every day with a trainer ($50 per hour is typical), once a week is a good strategy. Do your heavy lifting when you've got the trainer, then do aerobic workouts and lighter weightlifting (or better yet, lift with a friend) on the other days you're working out.

An even more affordable strategy is to do a few introductory sessions with a trainer. Then get set up on a good self-directed program. When that program starts to go stale, usually after about three months, have the trainer set you up with a new one.

—F. P. R.

STRETCH YOUR COFFEE BREAK: LOOSEN UP ON THE JOB

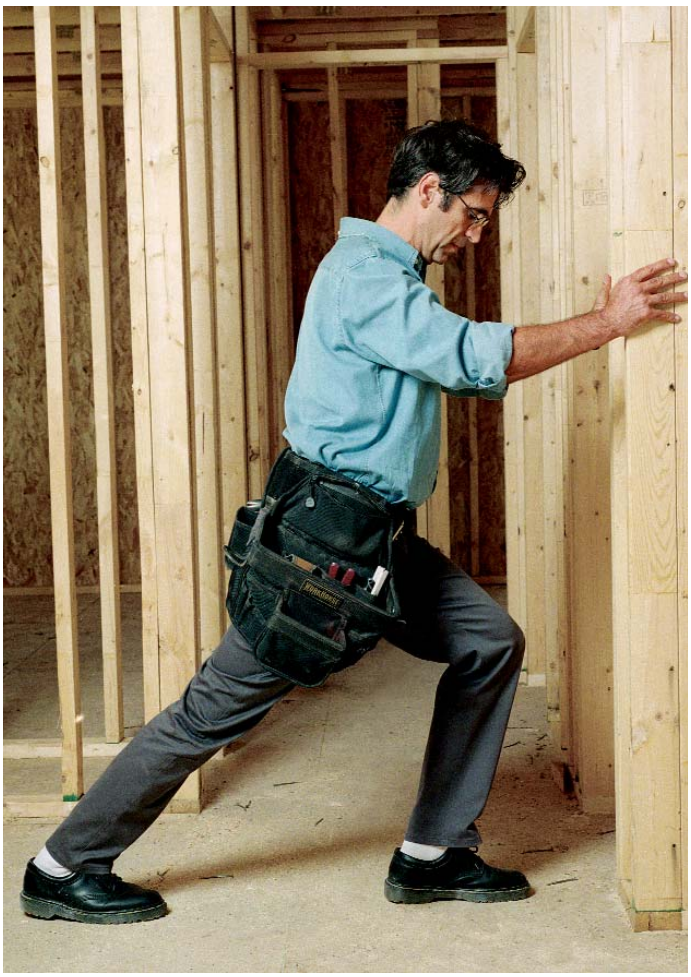
Construction work is grueling even if you're in top physical condition. To relieve tension and prevent injury, take a break in the middle of a long day and stretch for a few minutes on the job. The following are a few good stretches.



Upper-back stretch. *Interlace your fingers behind your head and bend your head down, chin to your chest, elbows pressing out.*



Arm stretch. *Interlace your fingers behind your back. If you can't, work toward it by grasping your hammer's head with one hand as you hold the handle with the other. Gradually increase the stretch by working your hand down the length of the handle.*



Leg stretches. *Stretch your calves and hamstrings by placing one foot behind you, heel flat on the floor, while lunging forward (slowly) onto the front leg (photo left). While holding onto the wall, stretch the muscles on the front of your thighs by grasping one ankle and trying to touch your heel to your buttocks (photo below).*



and then running the next. This type of workout is known as interval training. It's one of the best ways to improve your overall aerobic capacity. The idea behind interval training is to increase the intensity progressively and to build a body that resists fatigue. When you can lay down the miles along the trail, carrying lumber up and down stairs will be a breeze.

Strength training builds bones as well as muscles

Your muscles represent the most abundant tissue in your body. And this tissue does a lot more than fuel health-club vanity; it fuels your system with regenerative substances like glycogen, amino acids and human growth hormone (HGH). Muscle tissue is also where the body's energy is stored. After age 30, though, most people lose about a pound of this valuable real estate every year. Yet anyone who plans on living past 50 can avoid the complications of muscle loss. You don't have to aim at becoming the next Schwarzenegger to benefit from intelligent strength training. This means doing exercises that pit your muscles against gravity: push-ups, chin-ups, barbells and the like.

Exercises such as these not only build strength but also can prevent osteoporosis. Studies have shown that bone density bears a direct correlation to the amount of weight you lift yearly. An increase in your yearly tonnage translates into thicker, stronger bones.

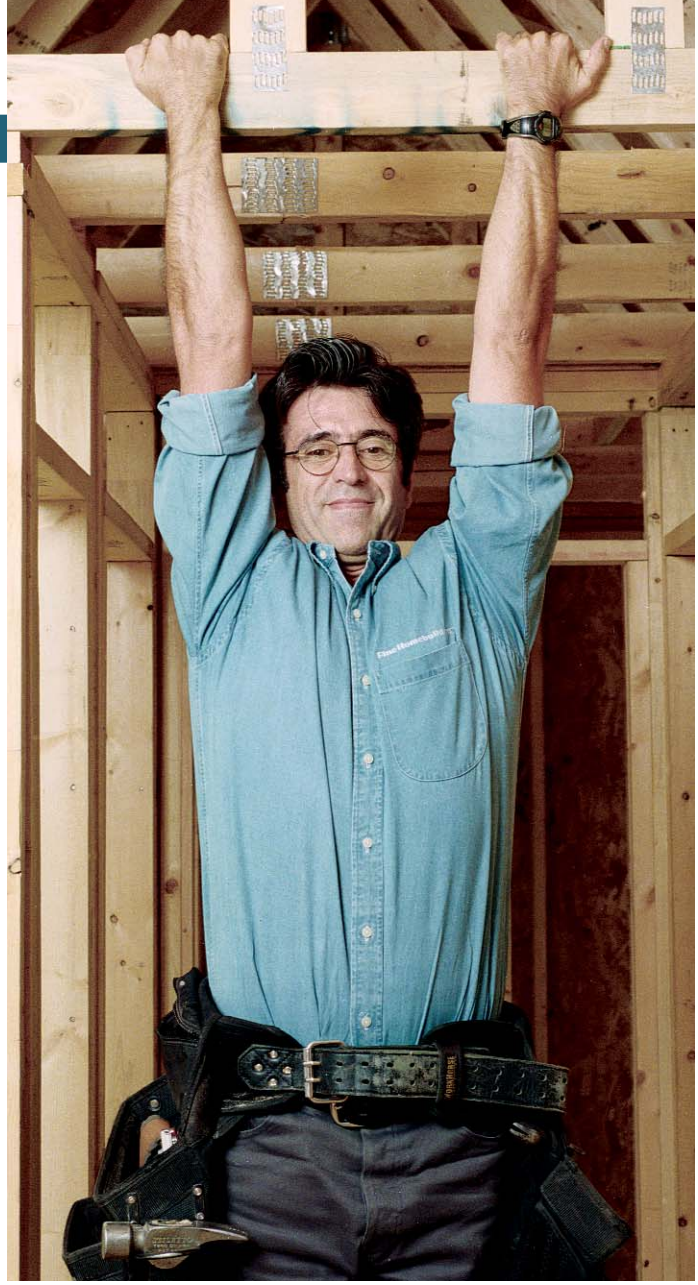
But intelligent weight training requires more than a few curls. Bones and collagen tissues respond to high stress. You need to work up to routines that recruit large muscle groups and multiple joints, exercises such as squats, bench presses and lunges.

You're only as young as you are flexible

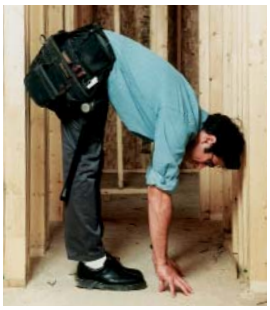
By the time you hit middle age, your body has lost about 15% of its "lubricant" content. As you age, your tissues dry out and start to resemble leather. Muscle fibers begin to adhere to each other, developing cellular cross-links that prevent parallel fibers from moving independently. You wake up stiff and aching.

Stretching helps to restore their moisture by stimulating the production of tissue lubricants. It pulls the interwoven cellular cross-links apart and helps muscles to rebuild with healthy parallel cellular structure.

Flexibility training helps your spine to stay supple and less prone to injury, too. Believe it



Lower-back stretches. *Without hunching over and keeping your legs straight but not locked, reach forward and place your fingers on the floor (photo below). To make this a bit easier on your back, start with your knees bent and your fingers on the floor and then straighten your knees. For a little extra stretch, grasp you calves and gently lower your head toward the floor without straining. Just hanging off a ceiling joist for a few seconds helps to decompress the spine (photo right). But don't just hang around. Put a little muscle to work with the occasional chin-up.*



or not, stretching your spine can help you retain an inch or more of height as you age. But the nice thing about stretching is that you don't need any equipment or a special class. In fact, a few flexibility drills may be the best way to spend your coffee break (photos above).

Stretching involves using gravity or an opposing muscle group to elongate muscle tissues. It's easy to do, but like any exercise, you have to do it right to benefit most: Spend 15 to 30 seconds holding an easy stretch without bouncing. Stretch only to the point where you feel a mild, comfortable tension, then stay there as you feel the tension subsiding. Regular stretching after working out (and stretch breaks while you're working) helps to stave off post-exercise soreness and gets you back to the job or your next workout with a lot more energy.

The most challenging aspect of fitness, and perhaps the most important, is the "exercise" of restraint when it comes to eating. A vigorous 30 minutes on the treadmill burns about 300 calories—roughly the same as one cup of ice cream. For most of us, it's easier to muscle through a workout than to skimp on dinner. But when you start to exercise regularly, your body starts craving the right foods naturally. Although I still admit to a slight doughnut problem, I've found my taste for fruits and vegetables has increased along with miles I can run, while my lust for french fries has vanished entirely. □

Fernando Pagés Ruiz is a homebuilder and a certified strength and conditioning specialist in Lincoln, NE. Photos by Peter Hasselbalch, except where noted.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Fitness can become a confusing pursuit when you're confronted with dozens of magazine articles and news segments advising seemingly contradictory exercise and nutritional information. Here are some books and magazines I've found helpful in sorting things out and separating sense from nonsense.

Banish Your Belly: The Ultimate Guide for Achieving a Lean, Strong Body—Now **by Kenton Robinson and the editors of *Men's Health* (Rodale Press; www.rodale.com; 610-967-5171).**
This book provides good, common-sense information on exercise and nutrition.

Fabulously Fit Forever **(expanded edition) by Frank Zane (Thunder's Mouth Press; www.thundersmouth.com; 800-788-3123).**
This legendary three-time Mr. Olympia and wise man of health and fitness provides a realistic, well-rounded path toward a lifetime of fitness.

Relax Into Stretch: Instant Flexibility Through Mastering Muscle Tension **by Pavel Tsatsouline (Dragon Door Publications; www.dragondoor.com; 800-899-5111).**
A decidedly masculine approach to flexibility taught by a former Soviet commando trainer who now plies his craft with the U.S. Marines.

Experience Life **(800-430-5433)**
Published by Life Time Fitness (a national health-club chain), *Experience Life* offers sensible advice on diet, exercise and healthy living. Nonmember subscriptions available for $16 a year.

Yoga Journal **(www.yogajournal.com; 800-600-9642)**
The premier publication of the yoga world. A wonderful way to get acquainted with all that yoga has to offer for health, flexibility and mental fitness.

Men's Health
(www.menshealth.com)
A fun read with humor, sex and excellent fitness advice.
—F. P. R.