

Training for “Women’s Trouble Spots”

Jill Coleman

As a personal trainer, I have heard time and time again from female clients that they want to “tone up” their thighs or tummy or the very common “flab on the back of my arms.” These statements are usually made during an initial consultation with the prior notion that lifting lighter weights and enduring miles of repetitions will help firm up these areas. In response, I usually say that we can definitely make that happen but only through the incorporation of heavy weights, failure techniques, plyometrics and addressing the body’s hormonal situation. Though it sounds ominous, it is the only way to get results with these troublesome areas.

Why Do Women Store Fat in These Places?

Blame it on hormones. Everyone has heard of “apple shapes” and “pear shapes.” In fact, you probably know which type you are. Because women have higher levels of the reproductive hormones estrogen and progesterone, they tend to store fat lower, saturating the thighs and glutes and creating that pear shape look. Meanwhile, men tend to store fat around their waist. This phenomenon is in large part due to the difference between progesterone and cortisol, a stress hormone notorious for its role in storing belly fat. Progesterone is a *cortisol receptor antagonist*, which means it blocks cortisol’s action in the trunk. This situation is advantageous for women since they have higher levels of progesterone, but unfortunate for men since low progesterone levels encourage fat storage in the middle. However, men also have more testosterone and tend to have more human growth hormone (HGH) since they more regularly engage in HGH-inducing activities like weight-training, than women. And both HGH and testosterone also block cortisol’s action at the waistline. HGH and testosterone levels decrease as people age, thus it is easier to gain weight the older we get and why we see younger people with less body fat and flatter stomachs.

Estrogen’s effect is prominent in the thighs and hips of women. This hormone usually out-does the actions of cortisol, HGH, testosterone and even progesterone to encourage fat storage in this area. However, as we age, levels of reproductive hormones (progesterone, estrogen and testosterone) decrease, along with HGH. This reduction coupled with the increase in cortisol from stressful lives, lack of sleep and long-duration, low-intensity exercise, leaves most individuals storing more and more fat in their middle. This is why it is common to see older adult females resembling more of the “apple shape.”

Levels of testosterone and HGH affect the triceps region as well (back side of the upper arm). The greater the quantity of these two hormones, the less body fat is stored there. Again, since men have higher levels of testosterone and relatively higher levels of HGH, they do not tend to store fat in the triceps, while for women, this area is considered a “trouble spot.” To remedy this nuisance, it is necessary to use exercise to increase levels of HGH and testosterone to balance out the naturally-dominant effects of estrogen and

cortisol. In addition, exercise in a way that keeps the level of progesterone comparable to that of cortisol. Here's how.

Saddlebags. Thunder Thighs. Junk in the Trunk.

Many women see a couple extra pounds immediately in their thighs, hips and glutes. They can *feel* the difference when they try to zip up their jeans. So how do we get beautifully sculpted legs and glutes, while burning the fat on top? Let me be the first to tell you that it will *not* be through performing body weight lunges to the beat of the music in an aerobics class. From an evolutionary perspective, the fat that sticks to thighs and glutes is fat that the body wants to be there. For childbearing purposes and because estrogen is highly active in this area, women's bodies hold onto fat in these places stubbornly. Thus, you can imagine just how hard it is going to be to break through this evolutionary barrier to reduce fat and sculpt the underlying muscles there.

Train Heavy and Induce Failure. For beginners to weight-training, there needs to be a 4-6 week period where proper form on squats and lunges is addressed and practiced. During this phase, no weight or light weight will be fine since true beginners will still generate a response in the legs with no weight at all. Once form is perfected, add weight as long as form can be maintained. And I am talking heavy weight. If you want to convince the body to give up these fat stores and coax the muscles out of hibernation, challenge legs and glutes from several angles with challenging weight and with various exercises. To correct the hormonal imbalance in the hips and thighs, induce testosterone and HGH release by training to the point of failure throughout each workout. Achieve *mechanical failure* (when the weight is too heavy to be lifted anymore) to increase levels of testosterone. Similarly, generate *metabolic failure* (the burning sensation in the muscles is so great, that resting is necessary) to release HGH. Attain both of these goals by increasing the density and intensity of your workout through performing several sets using challenging weight with little rest.

- **Heavy lunge:** Within a few weeks of incorporating heavy lunges into a leg routine, inches will start coming off and definition appearing. There exists a common notion among women that lifting heavy weights will make you "bulk up" or just grow the glutes outward. Unfortunately what many don't know is that as long as attention is paid to fat-burning, inches will be lost and sculpted muscle will appear. For example, take someone who performs a lot of cardiovascular activity and never weight trains. This person is probably slim, but with zero definition or curves. Try fat-burning cardio mixed with intense weight-training to failure and you have the recipe for overall lean limbs. Fat-burning cardio can even be accomplished through weight-training. I guarantee if you are using heavy weight, moving quickly and training to fatigue, you will be out of breath and taxing your cardiovascular system. To execute, begin standing with dumbbells in each hand. Step your right leg out in front of you with a nice, long stride. Immediately drop the back knee down towards the ground, reaching within a couple inches of touching. This position will assure that your front knee is lined up correctly. To make sure, however, check out your front knee to ensure it is behind your front toes. Press back to the starting position with the front heel. Repeat with the left leg. Perform 10-15

reps on either leg and take a brief rest if you get to failure before that point. Once you are ready, finish your set.

- **Romanian Deadlift** (also try **Stiff-legged Deadlifts**): These exercises target the glutes and isolate the hamstrings (back of the leg). If attempting deadlifts for the first time, ask a trainer to help you achieve correct positioning. This movement is technical, but if executed correctly, it is one of the most effective exercises to shape the entire back of the leg.

- **Wide Stance Squat**: This very effective exercise targets the inner thighs and quads, as well as hitting hamstrings and glutes for an overall leg burn. Begin by placing a barbell on your shoulders or use the Smith machine. Stand with your legs wider than your shoulders and toes turned out 45 degrees. When you lower into the squat, check out your knees in the mirror to assure they are about 90 degrees at the bottom and are going in the same direction at your toes. Feel a nice stretch at the bottom of the movement, then push yourself back to the starting position, all the while maintaining a tall low back and engaged abdominals. Repeat for 10-15 reps and rest when needed. It is much better to perform these with heavier weight and take short rests (5-10s) throughout the set than to go lighter and be able to do the whole set and more with ease. Remember, progressive resistance (increasing weight used over time) and going to fatigue multiple times throughout a workout will force your body to change. If you need to rest within a set, you are right where you want to be. Just pay attention to proper form to avoid injury.

- **Plyometric movements** can be a miracle on the path to coaxing your leg muscles out of hiding. Plyometric movements are ones that begin in a grounded state and at points during the movement, both feet are off the ground at the same time. In other words, you are doing some jumping here. Plyometrics are essential in breaking the intensity threshold for leg training. Many people shy away from these exercises because they are scared of injury or they have bad knees. If you *do* have bad knees, these exercises are probably not for you. However, with a clean bill of knee health, begin incorporating these movements into your leg routine and watch the muscles appear. I have successfully introduced squat jumps into the routines of some of my most unfit or overweight clients through effective instruction and attention paid to safety. If done safely and with strict form, these can be some of the most effective leg exercises out there.

- **Squat Jumps**: Begin in a squat stance with feet facing forward. Lower down into a deep squat and immediately jump up as high as you can. When landing, both feet should touch down at the same time with knees bent, ready to proceed into the next jump. Complete 10-15 repetitions for one set. Remember, if executed correctly, this exercise should induce failure before the completion of the set. In fact, this is the desired effect. If you are forced to rest because the burn in the legs is so great, that is a guarantee that your body is responding to the exercise.

- **Switch Jumps**: For the advanced trainee, these plyos require not only strength but also coordination and balance. Begin in a lunge position with the right leg forward. Drop the back knee down and then immediately spring up and switch legs in the air. Land in a lunge position with the left leg forward, right knee dropped down toward the floor. Repeat for a total of 10 repetitions each leg. Once again, metabolic failure is an expectation in this exercise. Take a quick rest (5-15 seconds) and then complete the set or get to the point of failure again.

Bat Wings. Wobble Arm.

For many women the back of the arm or the triceps region is considered a trouble spot. This is considered a “testosterone point” which means that the higher the levels of testosterone in the body, the less likely fat is to be stored here. In order to remedy the situation, it is necessary to generate both mechanical and metabolic failure through correct exercise. Mechanical failure is especially important since research shows that it is a superior way to generate testosterone release. This means using a challenging weight and taking a longer rest in order to really develop the triceps muscle group fully. You must also induce metabolic failure to keep progesterone levels comparable to that of cortisol. That means keep workouts short and intense.

- **Triceps Dip:** This is an exercise staple and should be performed at the beginning of a triceps workout. Advanced trainees should attempt to complete a few repetitions with no assistance, for a guaranteed mechanical failure. As soon as mechanical failure is reached, add a few pounds of assistance and complete a second set. Reach mechanical failure again and repeat for a final set after adding a little more assistance.

- **Skull-Crushers:** If you have ever attempted a set of heavy skull-crushers, you probably know the name of the exercise rings all too true. This technical exercise is one of the best for isolation of the triceps and will guarantee soreness for days. Begin lying on a flat bench holding a straight barbell or E-Z Bar with straight arms above your chest. The grip should be shoulder-width apart. Lower the bar down toward the hairline, making sure to keep the elbows in and upper-arm fairly still. Lower the bar until you reach an inch from the forehead and immediately press back up to a straight arm position all the while keeping the elbows in tight. Repeat for 8-12 repetitions or until mechanical failure is reached.

- **Heavy Squats:** Believe it or not, females should incorporate other movements that generate testosterone release that don't necessarily target the triceps muscle. Exercises that use multiple muscle groups across several joints are huge generators of this hormone. Though it sounds counter-intuitive, getting to mechanical failure on squats is a great way to prevent fat storage in the triceps! Other exercises include cleans and presses, push presses and deadlift rows.

Tummy Trouble.

For many women and especially the “apple” shapes, fat storage in the waistline can be a problem. Whenever a client asks me how to “get the fat off her stomach,” I usually lead her to the treadmill for sprints.

- **Interval cardiovascular exercise** is the best way to melt fat at the waist. The waistline is considered a “cortisol point,” which means that an excessive amount of the stress hormone cortisol, if acting along, will encourage fat storage in this area. Research shows that workouts longer than 40 minutes in duration elevate cortisol beyond the levels of testosterone, HGH and adrenaline. Remember, unopposed cortisol is a recipe for fat

storage in the gut so keep workouts short. Luckily however, when cortisol is present alongside HGH, testosterone and adrenaline, it acts as a fat burner.

Use interval training to generate metabolic failure. In other words, by the end of each interval, the trainee should really crave that rest period that follows. Sprints can be performed on the treadmill, stairmill, elliptical trainer or stationary bike. Following a 5-minute warm-up, begin with a sprint that lasts between 30 and 90 seconds where the object is to push the body to the point of exhaustion. The sprint phase is followed by a rest period lasting 30 to 90 seconds, depending on the fitness of the exerciser. Repeat sprint/rest combo for 20-30 minutes. The goal is to fit in as many intervals into that time period as possible since volume of work is critical in the release of testosterone and HGH to complement cortisol. Moreover, an intense cardio interval workout helps the body hold onto hard-earned lean muscle mass, and generates a large metabolic effect so that upon completion of the workout, the metabolism remains elevated and caloric furnace burns for hours afterward.

Reducing Overall Body Fat

In order to address the issue of body fat, it is important to remember that a clean diet consisting of lean protein sources, vegetables and fruit as well a small amount of whole grains is necessary to burn fat and hold onto hard-earned muscle. Consumption of simple sugars causes a spike in insulin in the blood stream, encouraging conversion of sugar to fat and ultimately fat storage. Keep your metabolism revved throughout the day by eating every 2-3 hours with a meal or snack consisting of lean protein and good carbohydrate sources. Post-workout, make sure to replenish depleted glycogen stores by taking in slow-burning carbohydrates and protein to maximize muscle strengthening and building.

Smart Approach

You have seen how training smarter, not longer will yield more desirable results. Remember, defining your trouble areas and sculpting long muscular lines takes hard work. But, it also means you must pay close attention to the hormonal environment you are creating with exercise. Cutting calories, focusing strictly on cardio, and relaxing in the Ab Lounge will not produce real results. Instead, focus on pushing heavier weights, generating failure, making workouts shorter and incorporating plyometrics into a killer result-driven workout. The goal is to raise testosterone and HGH while keeping cortisol levels in check. Take a smart approach to exercise and stay fairly clean on your diet and watch as inevitable changes occur in your physique.