

the
12-Week
fitness
project

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fitness
project

Updated for 2022 with 12 extra guidelines

RUJUTA
DIWEKAR

 juggernaut

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Preface

Health beyond weight loss

Like all good things the #12weekfitnessproject was born spontaneously.

And like all things spontaneous, this one too had a long history. In fact, you could say that this project arose because, as a nutritionist and fitness professional, I have seen history repeat itself time and time again. Of people resolving to get fit every year, committing to eating right, exercising, and then all of it fizzling out in about six weeks. Life, as they say, takes over.

But that is only if you think of health and fitness as separate from living your life. The fitness project was born out of the idea that health and fitness were and should be thought of as an integral part of life. A fitness plan that was so effortless, so common sense, so organic that you could make permanent, lasting changes to your life without turning it upside down. An evolution of yourself. Not an instant revolution.

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This idea also chimes with the latest research in nutrition science and was very much in evidence at the prestigious European Nutrition Conference (FENS), held in Dublin in October 2019. The FENS is like the Olympics of nutrition conferences and happens every four years. It's a place of learning, sharing and exploring the latest that this interesting field of food and nutrition has to offer. We presented the findings of the 12-week fitness project at the conference, marking our debut on the international scene with a very desi approach to food, health and lifestyle.

So, to keep it short, here's what the latest in nutrition science has to say:

- About 25%–30% of obese population is healthy, that is, they are MHO – metabolically healthy obese.
- This means that they have no or very low risk to diabetes, cancer, heart disease, etc., and have their liver fat and lipid profile under control.
- But the narrative around health is heavily misinformed and entirely tilted in favour of the weighing scales.
- Because of this the most common advice that you are likely to receive is to lose some weight.

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- People then resort to diets that help them quickly lose that weight.
- Most, if not all, diets that people adopt use restrictions on either calories, food groups, timings or portions.
- This means that most people have embarked on an unsustainable weight loss journey.
- They invariably fall off this regime, resume their normal lifestyle and the weight creeps back with a vengeance.
- And now here's the scary part. The moment this happens, they are 150% more likely to get a lifestyle disease like diabetes, cancer, heart disease, etc., than when they were earlier at the same weight.
- Essentially, a more sustainable approach to health is recommended instead of a more drastic approach.
- As far as health risks go, body weight loss of 5%–10% over a year is considered sustainable.
- The key is to form diet and workout habits that lead to long-lasting changes to lifestyle and to long-term improvements in health and well-being.

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- A sustainable diet should be comprised of food that meets these three essential criteria – it should be rich in nutrients, culturally resonant and ecologically sensitive.
- Simply put, eat local, seasonal and traditional, and invest in health with a long-term approach.

In a way, it seems that science is making a full U-turn to be on the same page as that of your grandmom's food wisdom. But truth be told, nutrition science has been steadily, although slowly, been refining its approach to health and well-being. But now you can officially say that food as a sum total of carbs, protein and fat is a thing of the past.

Nutrition science has realized that, in its full potential, food doesn't just make people healthy but it can lead to a resurgence in the local economy and revive or at least help global ecology recover. Not a bad mix of tradition, common sense and science, I would say.

But then this is the stuff that we all already know. We have observed and suffered the short-term fixes

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and the long-term health consequences in our own bodies and of those around us. We have also seen way too often how one thing is blamed for all the troubles that we face with our weight.

If fat was the bad boy 20 years ago, carbs are the new monster, but the promise is the same old one. Remove this one ingredient from your life and you will be healthy. The fitness project was born out of the need to cut through this narrative and to build a more sustainable, sensible and scientific approach to health.

It's like we all want to be swept off our feet by the man who will come into our life in his fancy sports car and James Bond smile but we all know that the one for keeps is the one who reminds you to pack your toothbrush in your travel kit when you have forgotten to do so. This fitness project is going to be that guy for you. Your steady, strong, silent companion, your guide to sustainable fitness.

Here's to a brand-new you.

Chapter 1

About the 12-week fitness project

The 12-week fitness project is special for many reasons. One of the reasons is the response it received. Within 5 minutes of opening up registration, 500 people had signed up.

‘Should I close it?’ I asked my partner, GP, while sitting on my balcony, sipping chai. ‘No, dekhte hain,’ he replied. ‘Let’s wait for 5000.’ I thought we would hit that number by the next morning. It was about 5 or 5.30 p.m. In the next hour, we had hit 5000 and by the next morning we had 75,000. We were overwhelmed, to say the least. We closed the forms and my office phone started ringing off the hook.

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‘Rujuta Diwekar’s office,’ I said, answering one of the calls. ‘What’s wrong with her?’ asked the voice on the line. ‘Why are the forms closed?’ ‘Sir, we have about 75,000 registrations.’ ‘So? You will close it? Is it some sort of punishment for people who are not constantly glued to FB on their phones?’ ‘No,’ I managed. ‘We won’t be able to deal with so many people or track their parameters.’

‘See,’ he retorted, ‘that’s the problem with people like Rujuta. Scalability se darte hain. They underuse technology. There are people right here in my office in Hyderabad, ten guys at least on my floor, who can crunch that data for you. What do you plan to do with the data?’ ‘Just use it to track progress,’ I answered.

‘Then use technology, madam, open those forms. Let this advice get to people, rarely do these kinds of things come by for free. Don’t let your lack of vision ruin it. Take 25,000 to 35,000 more registrations and then tell people that they can still follow the guidelines but not officially be part of the project. Ek critical mass toh pahunchne do.’ Shit! Thank you for that earful, I wanted to say,

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but I hung up and did exactly as directed.

At the end of 12 weeks, with 1.25 lakh+ participants from 40+ countries filling out compliance forms every week and marking their progress on health parameters every month, everyone I knew in IT wanted to know how I was going to analyse the data that was pouring in.

‘Do you have people who can do it? What program are you using?’ We had no clue. We knew from the summary given by Google forms that there had been huge improvement in health parameters and inch loss from waist, but we didn’t know how to get the exact numbers.

Thankfully for us, Vikas Singh from MyGov and Dhawal Goyal, an engineer from IIT Bombay, came to our rescue and volunteered to help us with the analysis. This data crunching was a big part of the fitness project and without them the impact of the fitness project would never have been quantitatively measured.

We would know it had worked – we knew that in our hearts – but exactly how much and how well we

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would never have known. So, Vikas and Dhawal, this is not the acknowledgements page, but you are my angels, thank you. It's a rare opportunity to track free, living individuals in a real-life setting and this wouldn't have been possible without you.

Also, to all our participants, thank you for following the guidelines, tracking your parameters and sharing your progress every week. Especially the 1500 who didn't miss filling and sharing even a single form. You guys are the gods of this project. To each one of you who participated, thank you, and know that the biggest universities and the most acclaimed of researchers have to pay people to be part of such projects. You did this for free, your love and your support is *the* most special aspect of the project. I will carry your debt in my heart forever.

Note: The project report has now been published as a research paper in an international public health journal and you can access and cite it as follows:

'Culturally relevant food and lifestyle interventions lead to sustainable public health'. *Proceedings of the International Conference on Public Health*, 5(1): 21–26.

<https://doi.org/10.17501/23246735.2019.5103>

Who, why and how of the project

We live in times of food confusion. For simple questions like ‘how can I stay healthy?’, ‘what should I eat?’ there are tons of complicated answers, most of them contradicting each other. This is also evident in the rise of diet trends globally, even as public health continues to deteriorate.

In India, we now have a huge population that suffers from non-communicable diseases (NCDs), like obesity, diabetes, cancer, PCOD, heart ailments, mental health issues, etc. Where does nutrition science stand on this? Well, the latest in nutrition science says that culturally relevant foods and eating practices are the gold standard for good nutrition. In other words, **the time-tested wisdom of your grandmother, passed down over generations, is what you should go by.**

So what does culturally relevant foods and eating practices mean in our day-to-day lives? Simply, it means we should eat local, seasonal and traditional. Eating local means eating rice and not quinoa. Eating seasonal means eating guava in winter

and mango in summer, and not kiwi throughout the year. **Eating traditional means following the wisdom of our grandmothers in totality. So haldi in tadka and not as a supplement. We have to bring back the pride in our culture, our languages and our cuisine.**

So that's why this project – because fitness is uncomplicated, inexpensive and something that everyone should have access to.

As to the how

- (a) One guideline was given every week, to be followed cumulatively. This meant that in week 2, they followed week 1 guideline + week 2 guideline, and in week 3 = week 1 + 2 + 3, and so on.
- (b) At the end of each week, participants noted down their compliance with the guidelines on the following scale – mostly, 50–50, not really.
- (c) At the end of each month, they rated their progress on a scale of 1–5 (where higher rating meant better results) on the following metabolic health parameters – energy levels,

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sleep quality, acidity/indigestion, sweet cravings, exercise compliance and PMS/period pain (for women). They also tracked inch loss at waist.

Who?

Anyone, anywhere, who was willing to make the effort daily for himself/herself. The guidelines had specifications, wherever needed, for lifestyle conditions like diabetes, PCOD, thyroid, etc., and also for which country they lived in.

Results

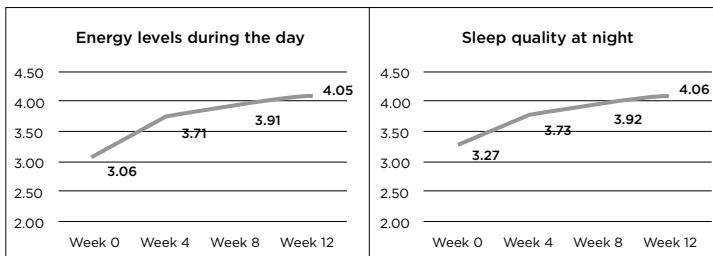
Here are the improvements the participants recorded.

1. Percentage improvement in metabolic health parameters (based on self-rating by participants on a scale of 1–5)

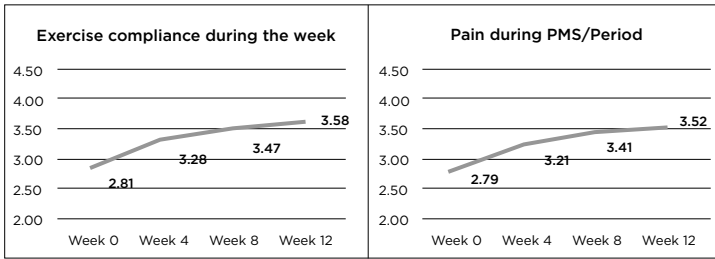
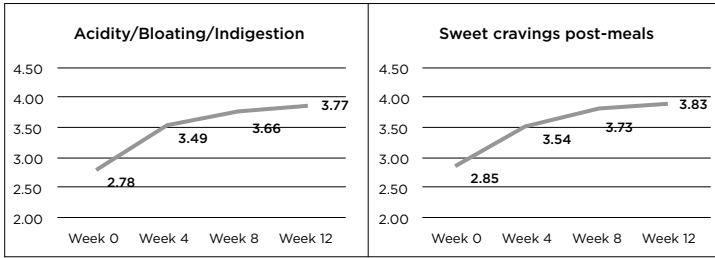
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Metabolic health parameters	Improvement in all participants	Improvement in consistent participants
Energy levels through the day	33%	44%
Sleep quality during the night	31%	41%
Acidity/bloating/indigestion	52%	68%
Sweet cravings after meals	51%	66%
Exercise compliance through the week	44%	54%
Pain during PMS/period (for women)	48%	53%

2. Improvement in individual metabolic health parameters over 12 weeks (self-reported by consistent participants on a scale of 1–5). The numbers in the charts are averages of the ratings.



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3. Inch loss at the navel

Inch loss at navel	All participants	Consistent participants
Up to 1 inch	38.4%	41.7%
1–2 inches	22.8%	27.8%
>2 inches	12.4%	13.0%
Total	73.6%	82.5%

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4. Percentage of participants reporting on other health parameters (reported through questionnaire)

Health parameters	% of all participants	% of consistent participants
Started strength training	56%	62%
Reduced contact of plastic with food	69%	69%
Fitness perception changed	74%	79%

5. Highlights from the questionnaire posed at the end of the year (for sustainability of guidelines)

Questions	% of participants reporting 'yes'
Consistently followed guidelines?	91%
Metabolic health continues to improve?	75%
Developed a positive mindset towards health?	74%
Lost further inches from navel?	70%
No more food fads?	65%

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The 12 Week FITNESS PROJECT

IMPACT REPORT

Jan-Mar 2018

40+ COUNTRIES

1.25 LAKH PARTICIPANTS

12 WEEKLY GUIDELINES

15000 AVG. WEEKLY FORMS FILLED

Un-complicating Fitness

- Focus on metabolic health parameters, not weight loss.
- Simple to follow, culturally compliant interventions are sustainable.
- Local, seasonal, traditional food; not carbs, proteins, fats and calories.

1. Improvement in metabolic health parameters over 12 weeks

Energy Levels



Sleep Quality



Acidity/ Indigestion



Sweet Cravings



Exercise Compliance



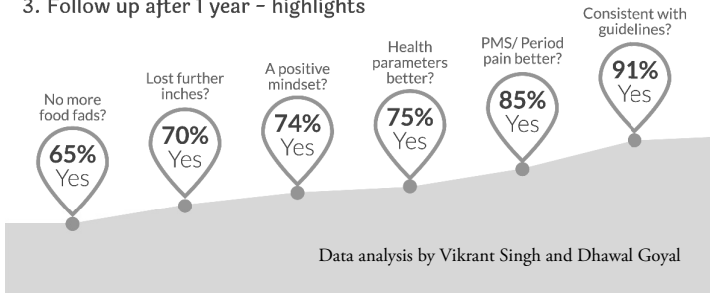
PMS/ Period Pain



2. Better health and habits overall (% of participants)



3. Follow up after 1 year – highlights



Chapter 2

The three rules of sustainable health

In this chapter, we look at the current diet trends, where they originate from, why they haven't been able to find long-term solutions for our health and well-being, and what you, as an individual, can do for good health and a disease-free life. Specifically, we cover these three rules of sustainable health:

1. Metabolic health vs weight loss
2. All-round vs one-dimensional approach
3. Long-term vs short-term solutions

These rules form the basis of the guidelines that follow in the next section of the book.

Diet trends 2.0

Diet trends don't come and go, they go and come back. As the 2.0 versions of their earlier selves. It's the same old wine, but in a new bottle, amplified via social media, influencers and even apps. So, Atkins or paleo is now keto or LCHF (low carb, high fat) diet. (One of my clients famously called it low on confidence and high on farts to describe how she felt while she was on it.) Low-calorie trends like 5:2 diet from earlier this decade are now intermittent fasting or time-restricted eating, etc. While one urges you to eat like a hunter, the other wants you to fast like your ancestors. Of course, you don't need to hunt while living in a cave and fasting delicacies like sabudana khichdi, sweet potato, samo kheer, singhare ki roti, arbi ki sabzi etc., are not even in the picture. But the noise around the diets drowns these minor details.

It's not that the weight loss and food industry lacks imagination when it comes to introducing revolutionary diet trends. It's just that they are limited by the parameters on the basis of which new diet trends can be developed. Most, if not all, diet trends in the modern era work by either

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restricting calories (through fewer meals or timings or portions) or reducing/eliminating food groups (counting macros, removing carbs, etc.)

Here is a quick summary.

Types of diet trends	Basic idea	Examples	Cultural spin	Basic flaw
Reduce food groups	Reduce food to carb/protein/fat and then remove or reduce any one of these food groups from the diet while overemphasizing the others	<p><i>1.0 trends:</i> Atkins, South Beach</p> <p><i>2.0 trends:</i> keto, paleo, LCHF</p>	Hunter-gatherer lifestyle	Looks at food from a reductionist view of food groups. Misses the bigger picture which links food to culture, cuisine and crop cycle – the food system approach.
Restrict calories	Restrict intake of calories either by portion control or by eating fewer times or in a limited time window	<p><i>1.0 trends:</i> Low-cal diets, 5:2, 2 meals a day, weight watchers</p> <p><i>2.0 trends:</i> Intermittent fasting, time-restricted eating, juice diet</p>	Ritual fasting, spiritual detox	<p>Calorie counting is unscientific and unsustainable.</p> <p>Fasting as a trend misses the point of ritual fasting which was to add diversity to diets.</p> <p>Eating as per appetite is a time-tested method to stay healthy</p>

So, as an individual who is looking to lead a healthy life, a life free from diseases and disabilities, what can we learn from the story of diet trends? That they are unsustainable. They don't lead to long-term good health, and in fact can cause more harm than good. And that good health doesn't come from following the food industry and influencers, but lies at the heart of our homes – our kitchens. And the people you must listen to are our grandmothers at home and the farmers outside. They are deeply integrated with the food systems, are the bearers of time-tested wisdom and, in the case of your elders, are genuinely invested in your well-being.

Vote for good health

It's very important to understand that health is not just a matter of individual responsibility but our governments and policymakers play a big role too. Take the example of pollution. Science has now conclusively proven that pollution is an independent risk factor for NCDs like diabetes, cancer, heart ailments, etc. This means that even if at an individual level you make all the efforts to eat right, don't smoke or drink alcohol,

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work out regularly and sleep on time, you are still highly susceptible to developing these diseases just because you live in a polluted city. Another example is policies on advertisement of junk food, especially those targeted at kids, and its impact on their health. Similarly, governments and policymakers can make a big impact on our health by regulating plastic packaging, imposing taxes on junk food, facilitating rural–urban linkages for fresh food, promoting walkable cities with footpaths and green spaces, etc. So what can *you* do? Vote for and demand such policies from your representatives in the government.

There is still a lot you can do at an individual level to ensure sustainable health for yourself and for your family, and that's where this book comes in. But how does one go about deciding if a diet pattern, a workout regime or a lifestyle will lead to good health? Fortunately for us, the latest in nutrition science is on the same page with our traditional food wisdom and common sense on this front. And drawing on this coming together of traditional wisdom with science, I have made three easy rules which can help you decide if you are on the sustainable path to health and fitness.

The three rules of sustainable health

1. Metabolic health parameters vs weight loss

The thing is that even when diet trends come back with a new name and a new game, the basic premise stays the same – weight loss. Sometimes outright, sometimes garnished with words and concepts like detoxify, rejuvenation, anti-diabetes, anti-cancer, etc. But for any diet trend to thrive, weight loss is the central pillar. Ever heard of a viral diet trend whose only promise is ‘food security for all’ or even a modest one like ‘better digestion and no acidity’? The multi-billion-dollar food industry needs our focus to stay on losing weight for it to stay profitable.

But what we notice in our daily lives, if we pay attention, is that the things that really matter when it comes to our well-being are usually the ones we can’t measure on a weighing scale or on a scale of any kind. Do we sleep well at night, do we wake up feeling fresh, do our energy levels stay good through the day, do we suffer from acidity,