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The Women on the Web

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Hate the Gym? How Very French, by Mireille Guiliano

Editor's Note: Mireille Guiliano is the internationally bestselling author of French Women Don't Get Fat. Her latest book, Women, Work and the Art of Savoir Faire: Business Sense & Sensibility will appear in October. She can be reached at mireilleguiliano.com and frenchwomendontgetfat.com.

From the 15th floor windows of my New York City apartment, I have a clear view of a big and many windowed "health center," (aka a four-story gym complex). September is one of the gym's busiest months. Right after Labor Day, active women, who I hope are incorporating daily outdoor activities with a seasonal summer flavor into their daily routines, flock indoors to the gym and an artificial routine of treadmills, exercise bikes and medieval torture devices. I see them sweating early mornings and late at night from my windows. I see them going and coming from my daily walk as I pass the gym.

It is a sign of the times — but also our American culture — that many women seem to have only two modes: sitting or spinning. They're either avoiding even the slightest heart rate increase (like those women in my apartment building who take the elevator to the second floor) or they're sentencing themselves to hours at the gym as punishment for their indulgences throughout the day. So often I see the begrudging look on women's faces and hear the phrase, "I don't want to go to the gym, but I have to." *Pourquoi?* If you are eating mindfully, and eating the correct portion sizes, you don't have to torture yourself on those metal contraptions or run a marathon to stay trim. French women reject the notion of "no pain, no gain," opting for a more pleasurable notion of mild, sustained exertion. We prefer all-day movement, what I like to call "the slow burn," and we practice it as second nature instead of attacking it like boot camp.

Exercise requires the same sense of balance we require in other aspects of our life. We know by now that most dieting has a yo-yo effect and fails; we must recognize that too little and too much exercise meet the same fate. Overexertion at the gym may actually sabotage your weight loss goals. Too many women I know go overboard on the treadmill, and then eat more as either mental or hunger compensation. Eating a protein bar loaded with chemicals and calories just to burn them off seems silly. Or is it just to *moi*? The overheated workout also often leads to defeatism (I give up!). My window survey confirms those overcrowded gyms in January are half as crowded in February and March. Those New Year's resolutions may provide us with the motivation, but after a few weeks of killing ourselves on the elliptical, we burn out.

French women see exertion as an integral part of the day. I encourage you to look at everyday movement (what you do in street clothes, not spandex) as essential to your overall wellness, and not to see exertion as something assigned to the gym. Here are a few French tips on how to stay fit without ever setting foot in la gym.

1.) **Don't save your steps, multiply them!** Instead of driving your car around in circles to find a close spot, purposefully park far away and walk the couple extra feet. Do you know burning a mere 50 extra calories a day equates to five pounds a year?! Burn those calories creatively; think thrice about using interoffice mail, walk that memo to your coworker's office. Take an extra few laps around the block at lunchtime, take the long way home when walking your dog at night. The principle is to squeeze as much physical exertion as possible during a few intervals a day into what were once routine tasks tied to avoiding any physical efforts.

2.) **Incorporate simple resistance movements into your daily routine.** Use your own body weight as resistance wherever possible. Isometric exercises, discreet but effective, are very French. This can be done before you even leave the house in the morning. For example, while waiting in traffic or on the subway, contract your abs for 12 seconds with your back pressed against the seat (it's better for you than road rage). When reading a magazine at home, try sitting on the floor with your legs stretched and apart in a V and your hands on each side; this is a great stretch for your inner thigh muscles.

3.) **Take care of your core.** I'm a firm believer that we need to attend to our abdominals as we age. These are the muscles that hold all our vital organs in place; they support good posture and a healthy spine, something we must take care of as we get older. Do a few sit-ups as part of a little stretch/exercise/yoga routine in the morning — it's never too early or too late to start this ritual.

4.) **Acquaint yourself with small to moderate free weights (3-5 lbs.),** especially if you're over 40. A bit of extremely simple resistance training is an antidote to hours spent on gym machines. Short but focused movement with small weights is a good way to preserve upper body tone and bone density and supplement the cardiovascular benefits of an active lifestyle. A little goes a long way, and that only increases the older you get, so don't let extremism overtake you.

5.) **Get *en vélo*.** Americans tend to see bicycling as recreation, and often either as a child's pastime or a hobby for only the most serious triathletes. But French and European women see cycling as a mode of transportation. I encourage those who can bike to work or shopping to do so. One of my pleasures in Provence is taking my bike to run errands. Riding my bike is one of my favorite warm weather routines and is, of course, environmentally clean and efficient, so I am happy to see bikes and bike lanes increasing in New York and other cities. Cycling has well-known health benefits: it's a low-impact, mild aerobic exercise that strengthens your heart and lungs; tones the large (read: fat-burning) muscle groups; keeps joints, tendons and ligaments flexible; builds stamina; and is generally fun, reducing stress and boosting your mood. And the view from a real bicycle ride beats the view from a stationary bike in a white-walled gym any day of the week.

6.) **Yoga.** If there was ever a fountain of youth, it might be the practice of yoga. Not only does it reduce stress, improve your posture and help to develop longer, leaner limbs, it also speeds up your metabolism, works nearly every muscle group and promotes an overall bodily wellness that no other sport or class can compete with. I practice yoga religiously, usually in the comfort of my own home. I am no yogi; I do not spend hours

upon end on my head — I simply have a handful of mastered poses and movements that make me feel good and keep me limber and trim. Most women can find 20-30 minutes a day to practice if they make it a priority. No equipment necessary.

7.) ***Vive l'escalier!*** Taking the stairs whenever possible is one of the main tenets of my philosophy. It always astounds me to see people who live no higher than the fourth floor and with nothing more to carry than themselves taking the elevator. In France, walking up and down stairs is a perfunctory part of our day. We rarely spend an hour stair climbing, but you should know that climbing stairs burns a stunning 1100 calories per hour. Climbing a couple flights a day will surely go a long way. A few times a week I choose to walk up the 15 flights of stairs to my apartment for some healthy fun — and yes, I do enjoy it.

In the end, remember that those who overexert themselves inevitably burn out, but those who know how to stay fit while enjoying life come out ahead, mentally and physically.

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