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Health buzz: Is our genetic map our destiny?

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If we are to believe popular science, we are who we are because of our genes. Our appearance, our character traits, susceptibility to sickness or the speed at which we recover are all due to genetics. The relationship between genetics and body size is perhaps the most contentious. Researchers the world over churn out results of innovative studies that will give us quick fixes to assist those of us who feel we were not blessed by the gene fairy. Think of all the recent dieting ‘fads’ in the last decade which have entered our modern day parlance- the Atkins Diet, the Macrobiotic Diet, the South Beach Diet, the list goes on. And all in the quest to change our body shape, with the added benefit it will supposedly improve our overall health.

Yet what if there was a way to turn genetics on and off like a light switch? According to New York Times bestselling author of ‘The Four Hour Body’, Tim Ferriss, it is possible. In the three years of researching for his book, Tim turned his body into a human laboratory, interviewing literally hundreds of PhDs, NASA scientists, medical doctors, Olympic athletes, and even former Eastern Bloc sport coaches.

What exactly would it take to morph one’s body? “Very small tweaks can produce outrageously large changes” says Ferriss. He is all about making the smallest changes for the greatest impact. Based on his research and experimenting, he claims that with four hours spread across one month, (on average one hour per week) and following a specific nutritional regime, it is possible to put on

muscle or lose body fat. The spur for the book came from trying to assist his father who was obese at 115 kg. And then the unthinkable happened - using some of the discoveries Tim made during his research, his father lost 40kg of fat and gained around 14 kg of muscle in the space of one year.

While most other boys his age were out skate boarding or dating girls, Tim said he has been recording his body's data since adolescence, taken over 1 000 blood tests based on hundreds of different diets and exercise programmes he has experimented with. He records footage of all of his experiments: the most grisly one of all being the laboratory in South Africa where researchers performed a biopsy on his thigh. He was testing for the ACTN3 gene, the gene which codes for fast-twitch muscle fibres which essentially determines who becomes an elite runner. He was disappointed to discover he did not have this gene. Yet, it is possible to 'develop' this gene through training and eating. "Even the Human Genome Project emphasises that genetics are not deterministic" confirms Ferriss.

While on first blush *Four Hour Body* may seem oriented towards muscle-hungry men, it is in fact gender-neutral, actionable and cost-free (except for the book cost of course). It is ideal for women on the go who do not have much time and who do not want to be slaves to the gym. Ferriss has had many examples of mothers who have followed this simple plan and have seen excellent results within 8-12 weeks: 2-3 repetitions with a low weight kettle ball, with a six minute break between each set, 2-3 times per week which equates to 5 minutes in total per week. Ferriss emphasises that food component is equally as important, and a slow-carb meal should accompany the programme- this means eliminating all white starches and carbohydrates, plus several types of fruit, 6 days out of 7.

By his own admission, he has no scientific qualifications. "You don't need to be a professional to practice good science, it is about following the scientific process". He is fluent in several languages and even has some informal qualifications in sex therapy - giving tips to men to bring about a 15 minute female orgasm (1-2pm on the clitoris 'clock' so he says). He has discovered some unconventional antidotes to common ailments: If you are trying to lose weight, eating 30 grams of protein within thirty minutes of waking and pre-meal lemon juice is a big help. For insomniacs, a tablespoon of coconut oil before sleeping or cold exposure can help.

Research from Yale University confirms that traditional gyms do not necessarily motivate people to attend and work out. "There needs to be some form of accountability to produce an incentive to change your behaviour- whether it be public shaming, humiliation or a bet with friends" emphasises Ferriss. He has a radical idea for a new style of gym: Why not charge everyone \$400 per month in gym fees? Then on every visit, you are reimbursed \$25. If after three months you have still not reached your target weight, the sign up 'before' photos of you in your underwear should be put on the internet.

In the twenty first century, Tim Ferriss seems to turn the traditional mantra that genetics is everything on its head. Each one of us is unique and there is no one size fits all methodology in our pursuit to live a healthier life. It is as much about a healthy body as it is having the right attitude and motivation.

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