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Healthy Aging Health Center

Over 40, Fit, and Ready to Bare Arms

From toned arms to trim ankles, celebs and other high-profile older women show off top physical forms. Why not the rest of us?

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WebMD Feature

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Madonna and Michelle Obama seem to have little in common. But together, they have awakened American women of a certain age to the allure of tight, toned arms. They've sent the message that those arms and toned, taut bodies may be within reach for other 40-somethings and older.

That message has been helped along by a legion of other celebrities who have passed their 40th birthday, yet remain virtually flab-free. The list includes Sarah Jessica Parker, Ellen Barkin, and Mary Tyler Moore.

But leading the trend, clearly, are the first lady and the material girl. Mrs. Obama, of course, posed in a sleeveless sheath for her official White House photograph. Recent photos of Madonna's very toned upper arms -- with so little fat her veins were bulging -- triggered debate about how much is too much.

The trend to get or stay super-fit and super-toned after 40 is a two-edged sword, health experts say. On the plus side, it encourages women to get [exercise](#) crucial to maintaining overall health and bone density, not to mention toned upper arms. But is getting the arms and bodies of Madonna and Obama really realistic for many working older women who don't hire trainers and who have a difficult time squeezing in even a brief workout? WebMD asked the experts to weigh in.

Getting Realistic

Madonna aside, can a determined 51-year-old pump her way to 30-year-old arms? Probably not, says Noel Bairey Merz, MD, medical director of the Women's Heart Center at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, Los Angeles.

And that's probably true even if they spend equal time in workouts, she says. An aging body can be toned up, for sure, but an aging muscular body will look different than a younger muscular body, she says.

That is partly because with age, the [skin](#) and the connective tissue start to lose elasticity, Bairey Merz says. "You have more sagging."

If you weight lift enough, or do other types of [strength training](#), you can produce a tight, firm muscle, she says. "If you pump the muscle, it's tighter," she says. But there is likely to be more flab underneath a 50-year-old bicep than a 30-year-old one

Bottom line: the muscles in your arms and elsewhere may look good, she says, but not like they're 30 again.

And, as active as a 40-, 50-, or 60-something might be, Bairey Merz says, it's a good bet they're still not as active as active 30-somethings who are often running after children in addition to squeezing in formal workout time.

On average, older women tend to have more overall body fat than do younger ones, she says. "The average 50-year-old woman has gained 20 or 30 pounds since the age of 20, is much less physically active, and is well on their way to sarcopenia," she says. Sarcopenia refers to the age-related loss of muscle mass and strength.

Hormonal factors come into play, Bairey Merz says. An older woman has less [estrogen](#) than a younger woman. That means less estrogen is converted to testosterone, which is crucial for muscle-building. "You will have to work harder [when you are older] to maintain the same muscle mass."

Of course, she says, there are exceptions.

How Much Is Too Much?

The recent Madonna photo showing her veins bulging from toned arms sparked alarm from some trainers,

who said she may be overdoing the training. But others say they can't judge from the picture.

"She has a very low body fat percentage," Matthews says, judging from photos. "Athletes have 14% to 20% body fat," she says. Doctors don't want women to go below 10% to 13% body fat, although experts tend to disagree slightly on these numbers, she says.

Matthews estimates that Madonna's body fat is possibly in the 10% to 13% range.

Bairey Merz guesses that Madonna has a very low amount of fat directly beneath the skin, called the subcutaneous fat, making the veins more visible. Most people have a layer of fat between the skin and the muscle, she says.

Gregg Miele, a Beverly Hills, Calif., personal trainer who has worked with celebrities such as singer Mary J Blige and Ellen Pompeo of *Grey's Anatomy*, doesn't think Madonna has taken her workouts to dangerous extremes. He points to a photo of Olympic swimmer Dara Torres, whose 40-plus body looks "ripped" like Madonna's. Yet, he says, the swimmer's body doesn't draw the same criticism.

Miele does caution exercisers to be aware of clues to overtraining, such as aching joints, [insomnia](#), decreasing immunity, and getting sick more often than usual.

Getting the Look

So what's the best workout plan to get Obama or Madonna bodies after 40? According to news reports, Madonna's trainer has her work out two hours a day, six days a week. Michelle Obama is said to have hit the gym as early as 4:30 a.m.

"It's impossible to say what it takes to get 'that' look," Miele. Genetics plays a role, as does overall body fat, Miele tells WebMD.

"Everyone is different," he says. "Some people come in to see me, and they run an hour a day. Yet they don't look like they work out at all."

Keeping overall body fat at a healthy, low level is crucial to achieving the toned look, he says. "The big thing with arms [looking toned] is, you have to make sure someone has a low enough body fat mass so you can see the muscles."

Cardiovascular conditioning is also key, says Jessica Matthews, a spokeswoman for the American Council on Exercise and a personal trainer in San Diego, Calif.

"Aim for moderate-intensity cardio work," Matthews says. "Figure six or so on a scale of one to 10." Get in 30 minutes at least five days a week, she says. The cardio training can be jogging, [walking](#), aerobics class, [swimming](#), or other activities.

To tone the muscles, "strength train the major muscles," she says. Do eight to 10 exercises that target them at least two days a week, and ideally three days, for 30 minutes each session, she says. Do eight to 12 repetitions of each exercise, for instance bicep curls and tricep kickbacks.

For strength training, women can use free weights, resistance tubing, weight machines, or their own body weight, such as doing push-ups, Matthews says.

Fit and Toned After 40, 50, 60: Health Benefits

Whether or not your workouts produce Obama or Madonna arms, pumping iron and engaging in cardiovascular conditioning after 40 has numerous health benefits, Bairey Merz says.

"If you are doing that work for your muscles, you are also helping your bones," she tells WebMD. "And you're helping your bones without [drugs](#)." Building bone density by [weight training](#) may delay or eliminate the need to go on the "bone-building" drugs often prescribed to prevent or reverse osteoporosis.

One health benefit of good arms -- as well as toned legs -- is "you are not on the road to sarcopenia," Bairey Merz says. The age-related loss of muscle mass and strength can lead to lack of functioning in the everyday world, such as being able to pick up a bag of groceries or put a suitcase in an overhead bin of an airplane.

Tips for 'Regular' Women

Most 40-plus women don't have a trainer -- or endless hours to work out. Here, experts offer their best tips for "regular" women who can't squeeze in a two-hour daily workout.

Put the "work" back in workout. Miele observes exercisers at the gym who wonder why they aren't getting

the results they want -- and in most cases they aren't taking the workout seriously. "They do two or three sets, then go talk to friends," he says. Or they do the same 20-minute workout on the elliptical trainer, [counting calories](#) but never increasing the intensity. He suggests combining cardio and strength training, such as alternating weights with the treadmill, and making each workout as "dense" as possible.

Try to work out first thing. "Do it before you check your email, before the kids get up," Miele says. "As each minute passes, too many variables come into play. Soon, you're saying, 'I'll do a double workout tomorrow.'"

If you can't afford a trainer, even for a session or two, consider a group class that focuses on cardio and toning, Miele says. Or buy a videotape. Cheapest option of all: find friends who want to achieve the same goals and head for the park together.

Think about what a toned body will bring you -- besides the right to go sleeveless. "Being able to put on a sleeveless shirt and feel confident is a good thing," Matthews says. But having a toned body isn't just about aesthetics, she says. Consider the improvement in functioning and strength such fitness brings, and being able to maintain that for years to come.

Squeeze in workouts. "Park 10 blocks away from work," Bairey Merz says. You then must fit in a 20- or 30-minute walk leaving your car and returning to it.

Develop other healthy habits that give you an automatic workout, Bairey Merz says, such as loading your own groceries into the car, taking the trash out yourself, and always bypassing elevators for the stairs.

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