

# What to look for in a Gym or Fitness Centre

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Getting active is fun. If you have decided that part of your activity programme is joining a gym or fitness centre, or your doctor has suggested you would benefit from a regular workout, this guide will help you track down the ideal gym for you.

In smaller cities and towns there may not be a choice of gyms, but it is important not to compromise your safety, make sure you are happy with your choice of gym before you commit your time and money.

## THINGS TO CONSIDER

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- **Where is it?**

When is the best time for you to work out? Choose the gym that fits your routine – if going to the gym after work suits you, choose one close to your work. Studies show that if you have to go home first you will probably be inclined to stay there!

- **What are the staff like?**

What is the ratio of staff to clients? Are staff friendly and helpful?

What qualifications do the instructors have? How have their qualifications been gained (through Network Fitness Leader Certification, Polytechnic, University, etc)? Do they have specific training in exercise suitable for your medical condition, if you have one?

- **How do they promote themselves?**

Do you feel comfortable with the surroundings of the gym or fitness centre? Do the posters on the walls inspire you or put you off? If you have been attracted by slick advertising or been given hard-sell tactics to join, be wary.

Check that the payment schedule suits you – is it lump sum or pay as you go? Are you able to have a free session before committing? Do they have a 'ten trip' concession, or discounts for Green Prescription patients or older adults?

- **What about the equipment?**

Is there enough equipment to go around or are there queues (Visit at the time you intend going)? Is the equipment up to date and well maintained? Is there something to look at when you are on the treadmill or exercycle – television, magazines, etc? Is the equipment labelled? When starting out there are a lot of new things to remember.

- **Do they offer classes?**

What classes are offered – low impact, aerobic, step or pump? What about relaxation activities such as stretch or tai chi? Is the gym itself and aerobics room spacious, well lit and air-conditioned? Try to watch a class before joining to see if the music, tempo and impact level is to your liking? Do the times suit?

- **How will it cater for your exercise needs?**

It is essential that your exercise routine fits your needs and is safe for you, particularly if you are over 40 (!!!!) or have been referred to a gym or fitness centre by your doctor.

Staff at the facility should ask you to fill out a pre-exercise questionnaire, listing any medical conditions and your previous health history. This could include whether you have or have had high blood pressure, diabetes, arthritis, chest pains, etc. You may also be asked about prescription medicines you are taking. Some of these questions may seem intrusive, but they are a vital part of ensuring you exercise safely.

You can also expect to undergo a routine screening test – up to 10 minutes on an exercycle, flexibility tests and weigh-in. This is so that your basic level of fitness can be assessed and a programme developed to meet your needs.

It is important that you tell the instructor your goals for the programme e.g. to increase flexibility or lose weight. This will help the instructor to develop a routine just for you. Ask what is realistic for you to achieve within a set period (e.g. three months). Ask how often your fitness should be re-tested to gauge progress against your goals. Is this part of the membership cost or an extra? If you feel a personal trainer will help you to learn correct techniques initially and to stay motivated long term, ask who they would recommend, why and the cost (this will range from \_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_ per hour).

- **What is the overall environment like?**

What other facilities does the gym or fitness centre offer – spa, swimming pool, massage, sauna, sunbed, creche? How busy are these? Are they part of your membership or an added cost?

What are the hygiene standards like throughout? Are members required to use towels with weights equipment? Are the changing rooms and showers clean? Are lockers and hairdryers provided?

Does the facility offer other health education material e.g. nutritional information, stretching advice, tips to keep you motivated, referrals to other health professionals?

Regional Sports Trusts have a database of gyms and fitness centres in your area that meet recommended standards outlined by SPARC (based on the above information)

**Phone 0800 ACTIVE (0800 228 483) for more information.**