

Fit Facts™

FROM THE AMERICAN COUNCIL ON EXERCISE®

How to Choose a Health Club

ARE YOU THINKING OF JOINING A health club? How many times have you skipped a workout because the gym is too far away or will be too crowded when you get there? If you're like a lot of people, the answer is "too many."

Why give yourself an out? Cut the excuses by doing your homework and choosing a club that's right for you. It's no secret that picking a quality club is key to sticking with your program.

But choosing a health club can rank high on the confusion meter. Sign-up specials scream in all forms of media, and it seems there's a new club on every corner. Before you jump on the latest two-for-one membership deal, take the time to consider these helpful tips:

LOCATION: For your fitness routine to be successful, exercise has to be convenient. You're more likely to use a club if it is close to either your home or workplace. You also don't want to choose a health club just because it is close to your home or work, but if you join a club that isn't convenient, you are more likely to find an excuse to stop going.

CLASSES: If classes are what keep you motivated, make sure the club offers an eclectic mix you like and that they are offered at a time of day that fits your schedule.

STAFF: Personal trainers and group fitness instructors should be certified through a nationally recognized certification organization like the American Council on Exercise (ACE). Credible certification can assure you the instructor meets the guidelines to provide a safe and efficient workout. ACE offers referrals to certified fitness professionals via its Web site, www.acefitness.org.

HOURS: Lots of health clubs open early and stay open late. Before you join, though, make sure your club is open when you plan to go. Then visit the club at the times you intend to work out. Check whether the club is too crowded or if there are long lines for equipment at that time.

TRY IT BEFORE YOU BUY IT: Sales people are trained to hype the benefits of their health club,

but you need to actually try out some of the equipment and get a feel for the club's atmosphere before you sign up. Request a day pass or a trial membership - this is a good way to "test drive" the health club's services.

PAYMENTS: Many clubs have a variety of payment options. Find a payment schedule that meets your budget needs, and take advantage of any sign-up specials. Find out exactly what the membership fee is and what it includes. Will you have to pay extra for childcare and towels? Don't forget to ask if they require an initiation fee; and if you are joining a new club that hasn't opened yet, make sure that any deposits or payments are held in an escrow account until they officially open.

REPUTATION: Before you join, talk to current members about their experiences with the club. The Better Business Bureau can tell you if the club is a member or if any complaints have been registered against it. Added security comes if the club is a member of the International Health, Racquet, and Sportsclub Association (IHRSA). IHRSA clubs must oblige by a code of ethics that protects the health and safety of their members, as well as protects consumers from unscrupulous business practices. To find an IHRSA club in your area, call (800) 766-1278, or visit www.healthclubs.com.

LITTLE DETAILS: As you tour the club, pay attention to details. How clean is the facility? Is the music too loud? Is most of the equipment in working order? Too many "out of order" signs may indicate poor maintenance. Are new members provided with a club orientation and instruction on how to use equipment? Make sure the club is a place where you would enjoy spending time.

With a little research and patience, you will be rewarded with a membership at a health club you can call "home." More importantly, you will be reaping the long-term benefits of a structured exercise program that perfectly suits your lifestyle.



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