

Fitness centres - how to choose one

Fitness centres, gyms and health centres vary in what they offer. This may include the programs and activities they provide, as well as their atmosphere and the quality of their facilities, equipment and staff. Choosing one that is right for you is one of the keys to sticking with your program. Do a bit of homework before making any decision.

If you haven't exercised in a long time, are overweight, aged over 40 years or have a chronic medical condition, see your doctor before starting any new fitness program.

Benefits of joining a health or fitness centre

A good quality health or fitness centre provides a safe environment for exercise and is supervised by trained personnel. It will allow you to use specialist exercise equipment and offer the kinds of activities you like and that meet your personal fitness goals – for example, personal training, free weights, aerobics classes, Pilates, swimming and so on.

With a little research and patience, you will be rewarded with a membership at a health club where you enjoy spending time. More importantly, you will reap the long-term benefits of a structured exercise program that perfectly suits your lifestyle.

Choosing a fitness centre

Before you join up, shop around and visit several facilities. Take a tour and ask questions. Observe the classes and programs that they run. Take notes on what you like and dislike about the facility. Key points to consider include:

- Location
- Activities, programs and equipment
- Support and staff
- Business practice
- Membership
- Atmosphere and image.

Location

Factors to consider:

- 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. While you don't want to choose a health club based only on location, joining a club that isn't convenient will mean you are more likely to find an excuse to stop going – if lunchtime is the only time you have to exercise, consider joining a fitness centre near work.
- Make sure your club is open when you plan to go. Check timetables to find out whether you can attend the classes you want.

Activities, programs and equipment at fitness centres

Factors to consider:

- Make sure the fitness centre caters for the kinds of activities you like and that meet your personal fitness goals – for example, personal training, free weights, aerobics classes, Pilates, swimming and so on.

- Boredom can set in if you don't have enough variety in your exercise program. Make sure the fitness centre has a variety of equipment, programs and classes that will keep your interest.
- Consider how important it is to you that the centre offers other facilities such as child minding, parking or a coffee shop.

Support and staff at fitness centres

The facility should have professional staff with the appropriate education and training related to the duties they perform. Factors to consider:

- Do staff members have appropriate training and certification that are recognised by the fitness industry? Fitness professionals should hold current registration with Kinect Australia or Fitness Australia.
- If you have special needs, do staff understand your health conditions and can they meet your needs? Are they able to modify equipment, facilities and programs if required?
- Is the gym floor constantly supervised?

Fitness centres and business practice

The fitness centre should operate in accordance with the Code of Ethics and Business Practice developed by industry and government. The fitness industry has experienced a high number of business failures in the past, so it is also important to protect your investment by joining a centre that is reputable and financially sound. Features to consider:

- Find out how long the fitness centre has been running. Generally speaking, a long-established centre is less likely to go out of business.
- Reputable centres tend to be members of Fitness Australia or are run by the YMCA, local council or another management organisation.
- Before you join, talk to current members about their experiences with the club.
- Make sure the fitness centre has adequate insurance in case you are involved in an accident.

Taking out a fitness centre membership

Factors to consider:

- Find out exactly what the membership fee is and what it includes. Are there different membership options and are all the fees for services clearly stated? You should receive a fully detailed membership agreement.
- Ask questions. Will you have to pay extra for childcare and towels? Some fitness centres offer discounts to concession holders or for members who want to train in off-peak times.
- Is a fitness assessment and personalised exercise program or prescription part of your membership? Is your program reviewed on a regular basis and will extra charges apply? Do new members receive an orientation and instruction in using the equipment and facilities?
- Does the facility provide you with a written set of rules and policies that govern the responsibilities of members as well as the facility?
- Many clubs have a variety of payment options – find a payment schedule that suits your budget and take advantage of any sign-up specials.
- Do you have a 'cooling off period' after purchasing the membership – just in case you change your mind?
- Find out if you can suspend or transfer your membership.

Atmosphere and image at the fitness centre

Make sure the club is a place where you would enjoy spending time. Would you feel relaxed and at ease while working out there or is it somewhere you would feel self-conscious and embarrassed? As you tour the club, pay attention to details such as:

- The age spread of the other members
- Whether one sex is predominant or not
- The general fitness level of other members

- What everyone else tends to wear – for example, stretch tights or tracksuit pants
- The type and volume of music played
- The sorts of posters or pictures on display
- How clean the facility, change rooms and other amenities are
- Whether most of the equipment is in working order – too many 'out of order' signs may indicate poor maintenance.

Take a class before you join the fitness centre

Don't join up just yet. Visit the club at the times you intend to work out to check whether the club is too crowded or if there are wait times for equipment. Take a casual class (or two) during the times you plan to attend.

Is a fitness centre the right choice for you?

Before you join a fitness centre, you might also want to stop and think if it's the right activity choice for you. Factors to consider:

- Don't think that spending money on a gym membership will motivate you to exercise. It probably won't.
- If you're not interested in the activities offered at the fitness centre – for example, if you hate the idea of lifting weights or doing aerobics – don't join. Instead, find activities that you find fun and convenient. You may enjoy inline skating, dancing, jumping on a trampoline or playing sport.
- Joining a fitness centre doesn't make you fit and healthy – exercise does. Physical activity doesn't have to involve machines or equipment either – walking is one of the best forms of exercise available and it's free.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Staff at fitness centres
- Fitness Australia Tel. 1300 211 311

Things to remember

- Reputable centres tend to be members of Fitness Australia or are run by the YMCA, local council or another management organisation.
- The fitness centre should operate in accordance with the Code of Ethics and Business Practice developed by industry and government.
- If you haven't exercised in a long time, are overweight, aged over 40 years or have a chronic medical condition, see your doctor for advice and support before embarking on any new physical activity program.
- Ask a lot of questions so that you will have accurate information. Making an informed decision can help you choose a facility that fits your needs and offers long-term health benefits.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Physical Activity Australia

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