

Fitness centres – how to choose one

There are different types of fitness centres, gyms and health centres, and choosing the right one for you requires some homework. Before you join a gym or choose a fitness or leisure centre, you should do some homework. You need to make sure the staff are qualified, assess the amount of support and supervision and the availability of equipment. You also need to look into the financial issues involved.

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 embarking on any new fitness program.

Choosing a centre

If you want to join a fitness centre, the key points to consider include:

- Location of the centre
- Activities, equipment and other facilities, for example childcare
- Staff qualifications
- Level of supervision
- Code of practice
- Image
- Financial and personal security
- Fee levels.

Location

Factors to consider include:

- The fitness centre should be convenient to your home or workplace. If you have to drive or travel too far, you might be tempted to skip workouts.
- Don't assume that a fitness centre located near home would be most convenient. If you only have time to exercise at lunchtime, for example, consider joining a fitness centre near work.

Activities and equipment

Factors to consider include:

- Make sure the fitness centre caters for the kinds of activities you like – for example free weights, aerobics classes, swimming pool and so on.
- Remember that boredom sets in if you don't have enough variety in your exercise or physical activity program. Ensure that the fitness centre has lots of different equipment that will keep your interest and that your program is reviewed on a regular basis.
- Take a close look at the equipment for wear and tear.
- See if the change rooms and other amenities are clean and well maintained.

- Check timetables to find out whether you can attend the classes you want.
- Enquire about their routine fitness screening. This should include a suggested exercise program designed to suit your needs. Regular reviews should be available. Be sure to find out if any extra charges apply.
- Consider the importance of other facilities – for example, onsite child minding, availability of parking or coffee shop.
- Ask if the gym floor is constantly supervised as part of your membership, or if individual attention attracts extra personal training fees.

Code of practice

The fitness centre should operate in accordance with the Code of Ethics and Business Practice developed by industry and government. Check with the owner, but features should include:

- Reasonably priced shorter term membership options.
- Maximum memberships of one year. Fitness Victoria prohibits centres selling memberships for more than 12 months (plus an additional 3 months for free)
- Fully detailed membership agreement.
- A cooling off period after purchasing the membership, just in case you change your mind. (Centres which are members of Fitness Victoria offer a seven day cooling off period)
- Fitness trainers should be registered with Kinect Australia or Fitness Australia.

Image

It's important to be comfortable with the atmosphere of the fitness centre. Would you feel relaxed and at ease while working out there, or self-conscious and embarrassed? Factors to consider include:

- The age spread of the other members
- Whether one sex is predominant or not
- The general fitness level of the other members
- What everyone else tends to wear – for example, stretch tights or tracksuit pants
- The type of music played
- The sorts of posters or pictures on display.

See over ...

Choose a reputable centre

The fitness industry has experienced a high number of business failures. As a member, you can protect your investment by joining a centre that is reputable and financially sound. Factors to consider include:

- 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 Victoria or are run by the YMCA, local council or another management organisation.
- A reasonable annual fee is between \$500 and \$800. Be wary of ultra-cheap membership deals, as these often flag financial problems for the centre.
- Choose short term memberships to reduce the odds of losing money should the centre unexpectedly shut down.

Membership

Factors to consider include:

- You should expect to get clear and detailed information on the various membership deals on offer. Ask questions.
- Find out if you can suspend or transfer your membership.
- Some fitness centres offer discounts – for example, to concession holders or for members who want to train in off-peak times.
- Make sure the fitness centre has adequate insurance in case you are involved in an accident.
- Ask if the centre offers a variety of payment options.

Take a class before you join

Don't join up yet – take a casual class (or two) during the times you plan to attend. Points to consider include:

- Check to see if there are long queues. There should be enough equipment for everyone.
- Make sure the centre has enough staff to cater for their clientele.
- Ask the staff for help during your casual class. You should find them approachable, friendly, knowledgeable and good at communicating.

Resolving problems

If you are experiencing problems with a fitness centre and you can't resolve the dispute with the centre's management, you can ask for help from Fitness Victoria. Very few problems arise and those that do, are virtually all resolved with a few quick phone calls.

Is a fitness centre the right choice for you?

Before you join a fitness centre, you might want to stop and think if it's the right choice of you. Some people buy a gym membership hoping it will help them improve their fitness or manage their weight. After one or two sessions they never set foot inside the gym again, which means they are hundreds of dollars out of pocket. Some things to consider before you buy a gym membership include:

- 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 up. Instead, concentrate on finding physical activities that you find fun and convenient. You may enjoy inline skating, dancing, jumping on a trampoline or playing a team sport like netball.
- Joining a fitness centre doesn't make you fit and healthy - exercise does. Physical activity doesn't have to involve machines or equipment; walking is one of the best forms of exercise available and it's free.

See over ...

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Staff at fitness centres
- 'Go for your life' Infoline service Tel. 1300 73 98 99 or website <http://www.goforyourlife.vic.gov.au>
- Fitness Victoria on Tel. (03) 9428 7733 or www.fitnessvictoria.com.au

Things to remember

- Reputable centres tend to be members of Fitness Victoria, 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.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by, Kinect Australia (inc VICFIT in Victoria). The Better Health Channel is part of the Department of Human Services, Victoria.

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