



What You Need to Know About Joining a Gym

Joining a gym is the same as making any major purchase. You need to make an informed decision and consider some important factors before you sign on the dotted line.

Consider Your Needs

The most important factor in choosing the right gym is finding one that fits your goals. Why do you want to join? To lose weight? To tone up? To treat an injury or health condition?

Look for a facility that offers the most classes that meet your needs. For example, if you have arthritis, a facility offering water aerobics classes will be preferable over one that does not. Get a tour of the facilities and check out the array of equipment provided.

Ask These Questions

You'll want to ask some important questions as you choose a gym:

1. Are **Trainers Qualified?**

Unfortunately, there is no one association that sets qualifications for trainers in gyms in the United States. Some gyms, however, do require that their trainers achieve certification from the American College of Sports Medicine, the largest sports medicine and exercise science organization in the world.

Ask if the staff is certified by this organization or a similar one. A gym with qualified staff is preferable over one that does not have requirements for its staff.

2. How **Do Classes Work?**

Are classes included in your monthly fee, or do you have to pay an additional fee for them once you join? Do you have to pay for them ahead of time (say, six months worth)? Does the gym offer one free class so you can find out if it's right for you?

3. **Is it Clean?**

While there are no nationally-recognized health codes specific to gyms, you'll want to check out the facilities for cleanliness.

Take a look at the equipment -- dust piled up beneath or around the exercise machines is a sure-fire sign of poor maintenance. Check out the lockers, showers, and changing areas to make sure they look properly attended-to.

Once you do join, protect yourself. Wipe down machines with antibacterial wipes before you use them (should be provided), and wear shower shoes in the locker room and shower.

4. What **are Peak Times?**

If you plan on using the facilities at approximately the same time each day, you may want to scope

out the situation before you join. Is the parking lot packed at your desired gym time? Is there a line to use the treadmills? Joining a gym won't do you any good if, every time you go, you can't use the machines you need.

5. Ask **the BBB**

It doesn't hurt to check with your local Better Business Bureau to make sure there have been no complaints about the gym you are considering joining.

6. Read **the Small Print**

When you start looking around, you will find that you cannot use a gym's facilities without joining, and, therefore signing a membership contract.

Most gym contracts are nonrefundable. While a few exceptions can allow you to cancel a gym membership contract -- say, you move more than 25 miles away or your doctor confirms that you cannot exercise due to an injury -- the contract *is* a contract. Your membership will have to be paid whether you're using the facility or not.

Be careful about signing a long-term contract. While paying in advance will probably get you a better rate, most experts agree it is preferable to pay month-to-month.

Next, when you're presented with the contract, do not sign it on the spot. Resist high pressure sales techniques and stick to your guns -- don't sign anything until you've had a chance to go home or another quiet location and review it with a fine tooth comb. Even better, have someone else read over it in case they spot something you don't.