



Highlights: Health Clubs

The infomercial-touted abs-toning contraption you ordered while eating ice cream on the couch is collecting dust, and the treadmill has turned into a good place to hang the laundry. Exercising at home doesn't cut it anymore, so you've decided it's time to join a health club. *Boston Consumers' CHECKBOOK* magazine and www.checkbook.org have ratings of 70 local fitness facilities and can help consumers find a facility that fits their budget, needs, and lifestyle. Some findings from CHECKBOOK's report include:

CHECKBOOK identified significant price differences among clubs that offered the same basic fitness opportunities. For example:

- For an individual interested in fitness equipment and group exercise classes, a single membership that provides unlimited access to all facilities for one year costs \$150 at the MG Fitness in Wakefield; at Peoplefit Health and Fitness Center in Woburn, a similar membership costs \$1,237.
- For a couple who want to play indoor tennis and swim, a three-year couple's membership costs \$2,618 at Westford Racquet & Fitness Club; at The Thoreau Club in Concord, a similar membership costs \$9,523.

CHECKBOOK also found wide variations in quality among local clubs. For example:

- A number of clubs were rated "superior" for "quality/maintenance of facilities and equipment" by more than 80 percent of the customers CHECKBOOK surveyed, while others got such favorable ratings from fewer than 30 percent of their surveyed customers.
- While many clubs have not been the subject of complaints at local government agencies and the Better Business Bureau, a few had five or more complaints filed against them during the three-year period CHECKBOOK reviewed.

CHECKBOOK recommends consumers do the following when shopping for a fitness facility:

- Consider alternatives. A local government recreation center might fit the bill, and is likely to be a lot cheaper. Even less expensive, of course, and maybe more fun, is taking a run or walk regularly or playing pickup ball at a nearby playground.
- Before shopping or joining, you should think realistically about the kind of workouts you're likely to stay with consistently.
- Identify clubs that are close to work or home and check the hours that clubs are open.
- Visit clubs during the hours you're most likely to use them to check how crowded facilities and classes are. Ask members about crowding issues, and about their general satisfaction with their club.
- Find out how often classes and facilities that interest you are available. If there are sign-up sheets for classes and facilities you might use, look at these sheets to see how easy it will be to get access.
- Ask questions of instructors, visit classes, and listen to instruction given to other members.
- Check whether showers are clean, equipment is clean and in good working order, and, when applicable, the pool is clean.

- Ask about any initiation fees – most clubs charge them – and whether prices quoted are based on a year's commitment.
- If the club offers month-to-month pricing, consumers should consider choosing that option for a trial period.
- Carefully read a contract before signing it. Find out about the club's refund policies for people who wish to cancel or are moving away. See if the club allows members to sell their memberships or freeze monthly payments if they won't be using the club for an extended time.

The media may cite selected examples of top-rated health clubs, as shown in Boston Consumers' CHECKBOOK, and CHECKBOOK's editors are available for interviews. Please call Jamie Lettis at 202-454-3006 to schedule.

###