

WEIGH YOUR
fitness
OPTIONS

Before you hit the gym

| Lisa Evans

After an indulgent holiday season, many of us make a mad rush to the gym hoping to shed those extra turkey and stuffing pounds, but finding the right fitness facility is key to ensuring we don't slide off the treadmill come March. >>

“If you’re at a facility that doesn’t have the right programs, the right atmosphere, and the right services, you’re just not going to stick with it,” says fitness expert Libby Norris. Follow these tips to find the right fitness option for you.

LOCATION

Convenience is key to sticking with a fitness regimen. Shop for a facility within 10 km of work or home. “The farther you have to drive, the more there’s going to be time and opportunity to create excuses and reasons why you can’t go,” says Norris.

BIG BOX OR SPECIALIZED STUDIO?

These days there are many fitness options. “Big box” gyms (or gym chains) offer group classes, space to work out independently, and extras such as pools and squash courts. Other gyms, such as the 24-hour type, provide only individual exercise equipment. Then there are community-style boutique fitness studios that offer smaller group classes and personal training, and specialized studios that focus on one type of exercise such as yoga or spinning.

WHAT ARE YOUR WORKOUT NEEDS?

Before shopping for a facility, ask yourself the following questions.

Am I self-motivated or do I prefer to work out in a group?

“If you really like competition, then classes are the healthiest way to push yourself,” says Nadia Bender, owner of the boutique studio Fitness That Fits in Toronto. Group classes also help combat boredom (a common reason for dropping off the fitness wagon) by offering a variety of workouts and instructors.

If you’re self-motivated and prefer to work out in absence of any social interaction, a facility that offers free weights, machines, and plenty of personal space may be ideal.

What type of exercise do I like?

Knowing what you enjoy about exercising can help you find a facility that meets your needs. If you really love yoga, but the local gym only offers one yoga class per week, a specialized yoga studio may be a better fit.

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Do I want a customized workout?

While big-box gyms offer a repertoire of fitness classes to suit the masses, smaller studios are able to customize workouts to suit individual fitness needs. “When you go to a specialized studio, the exercises you do within the class are different every time. It’s never the same music. It’s never the same order of the exercises or the same equipment,” says Bender.

Do I enjoy personal attention?

While it’s easy to remain anonymous in a gym that sees 2,000 people walk through the doors daily, a smaller studio has a community atmosphere where everyone is known by name.

Is personal training for me?

Personal training (either at home or at a gym) is ideal for individuals with particular fitness goals or health concerns, such as those recovering from surgery or illness, and it can also be great for fitness newbies.

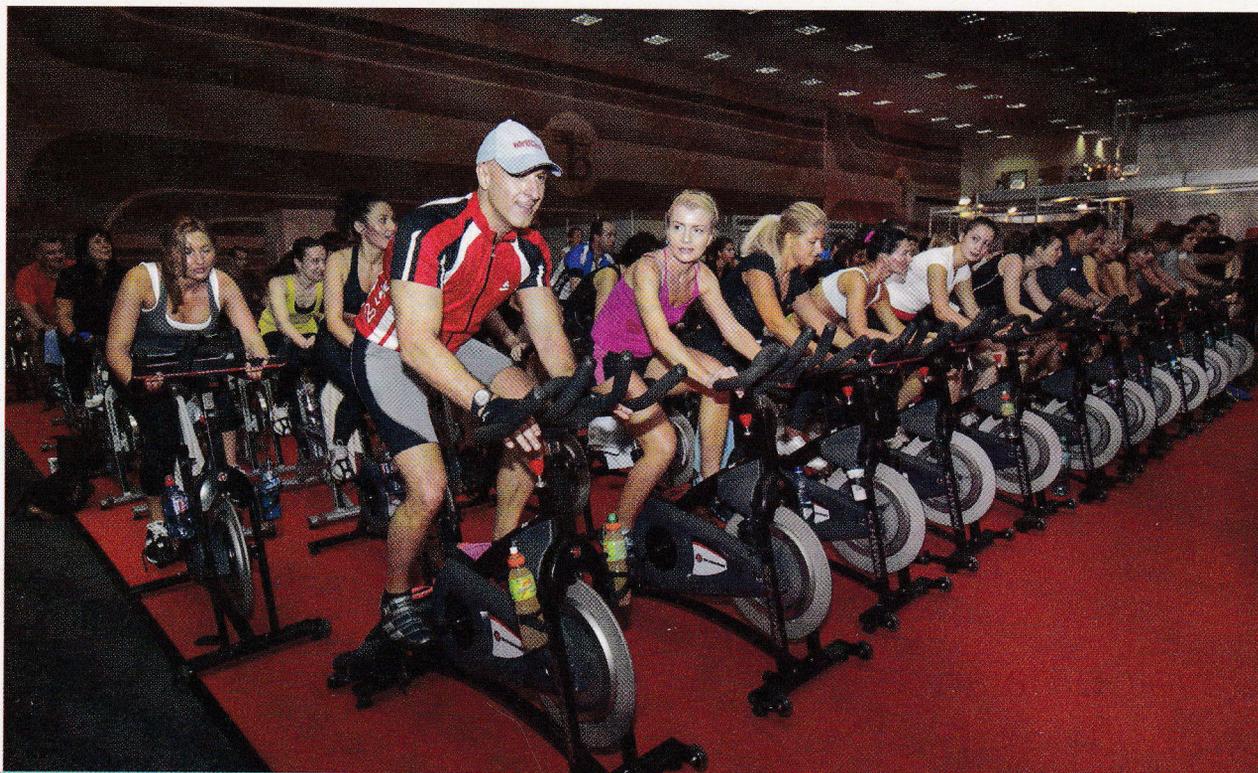
TAKE A TOUR

A tour will help you gauge the facility’s atmosphere to determine if it’s a place you will feel comfortable in. Norris recommends visiting the gym during the time you intend to work out to see what’s offered and the clientele who go at that time.

A senior who enjoys group classes but wants to work out mid-afternoon may not enjoy a conventional gym where group classes are limited to the morning and evening hours, but would find a host of senior-targeted group fitness classes at a local community centre.

TRY BEFORE YOU BUY

Before locking into an annual contract, ask if the facility provides a free trial period for first-time customers. Many boutique studios allow you to pay by the class, meaning there’s less of a commitment.



GET FIT ON A BUDGET

You can get the most out of your sweat equity by following these budget-friendly fitness tips.

Stay at home

Working out at home is a great way to save on fitness. "Home training has changed," says Norris. "It's not just buying one DVD anymore and doing it over and over. Most home workout DVD programs now give you eight to 20 workouts."

Check out a community centre

Some community centres offer fitness classes and community gyms for a reasonable price. Check out your local YMCA, YWCA, and recreation centre for offerings.

Scope out free fitness activities

Many communities offer free yoga in the park, for example, during summer months.

Shop for deals

Deal websites such as *Groupon.com* and *LivingSocial.com* often feature great deals on fitness facilities ranging from 20 to 80 percent off classes for a limited time. This gives you a great chance to try the facility at a lower cost.

Do the math

Make a list of the fitness activities you want to do. If your list includes spinning, yoga, and Pilates, attending

three different specialty studios for those activities is going to be much more costly than attending a big-box fitness facility that offers all of those classes under one roof.

To commit or not to commit

Many big-box gyms require customers to lock into a yearly contract. While boutique and specialized fitness studios offer the option of purchasing single-class passes (which can cost as much as \$20 per class), this lack of commitment can come at a steep cost. If you plan on working out several times a week, a monthly or yearly membership can save you a ton of money.

Beware of extra fees

Some gyms offer exciting extras such as squash courts or hot yoga classes, but these can come at an additional charge. Be sure to ask about additional fees before signing on the dotted line to avoid surprises.

Ask about cancellation policies

While no one wants to go into a fitness relationship thinking about divorce, ask about cancellation policies to ensure you don't get stuck paying for a membership you aren't using if life changes, such as a move or illness, and you're unable to attend. **a**

Lisa Evans is a Toronto-based freelance writer who loves group fitness classes and found the most success at specialized fitness studios.