

Featured Merchant

Medical Fitness Beyond The Body Beautiful

Written By Judy Chang Cody

When you think of “fitness,” what comes to mind? A firm, sleek body? Bulging biceps and six-pack abs? Perky 20-somethings in spandex workout gear? Now, what do you think of when you hear the term “medical fitness”? If you’re envisioning a rehab center filled with wounded athletes, or a senior center full of sick patients, or simply drawing a blank, you’re not alone. We tend to equate fitness with big muscles and buff bodies, an image magnified by the strength and vitality of youth. But “medical fitness” is one of the fastest growing trends in the health club industry, one that is relevant to everyone, at every age. It’s not about looks, it’s all about exercise and physical activity to promote health and prevent disease.

“I KNOW I SHOULD . . .”

Exercising for better health is nothing new and it’s nearly impossible to avoid today’s medical news touting the benefits of exercise and regular physical activity. For overall wellness and disease prevention, Dennis Tafflin, DO, a family physician affiliated with Doylestown Hospital, encourages all of his patients to participate in physical activities on a regular basis. “Most reasonably healthy individuals

should strive for 45 minutes of activity, five days a week,” he says.

“But that’s the goal.

The most important thing is to start to increase your activity and gradually build on it. For folks over 65, it can be difficult

to break old habits and get moving, but when they do, they can see tremendous benefits.”

Yet despite all these messages and even with a doubling of fitness centers in the past decade, only one-third of adults engage in moderate physical activity on a regular basis according to the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, and less than 15 percent belong to a fitness center. “The problem is that health clubs often cater to the dedicated exerciser, not to the fitness novice or to anyone else needing a little extra support,” says Pat Vida, Executive Director of Fitness and Wellness at the Health & Wellness Center by Doylestown Hospital. “Another issue can be the lack of professional staff and programming variety to support exercisers and to keep them motivated.”

THE MEDICAL FITNESS DIFFERENCE

One solution that appears to be working for an increasing number of Americans is the medical fitness center. According to the Medical Fitness Association, these centers have higher retention rates because of the unique differences they offer including: a personalized approach to program design, a more highly qualified staff, medical supervision and clinical integration, and a higher standard for safety, cleanliness and customer service. From 2000 to 2003, membership in medical fitness centers nearly doubled and today there are over two million members in these unique facilities.

From the moment a new member joins a medical fitness center, the differences are quickly apparent. Because the primary focus is on maintaining health and preventing disease, most medical fitness centers start by performing a complete health risk assessment to understand the current health status of each member and to customize a program that addresses those needs and goals. Additionally, monitoring of key health measures such as blood pressure and BMI (body mass index) is also commonly available at these centers. “We’ve taken the health risk assessment to the next level at the Fitness Center at the Health & Wellness Center,”



notes Vida. "Our new computerized assessment program enables trainers to develop personalized exercise plans with the right levels and the right types of activities to optimize outcomes while ensuring safety. The database also allows members to easily share results with their physicians, if desired."

Another difference is the level of staff expertise found at medical fitness centers. Because of the broader range of physical ability among members, these centers often require trainers to hold four-year degrees in exercise physiology or kinesiology and often provide additional training for special populations.

Even for exercisers who don't have any medical conditions, a medically directed fitness program can be beneficial. Besides the clinical aspects, another hallmark of these centers is the wider range of programs offered. Typically, there is a larger percentage of members who are either new exercisers or who have some limitations in activity. A greater variety of exercise options are provided to address these needs. "Like most health clubs, we have the hard core classes such as studio cycling and body sculpting," says Vida. "Unlike the typical centers however, we also have a wonderful selection of beginner classes, programs for those with limited mobility, as well as a number of specialized programs for specific conditions such as arthritis and MS." Centers with aquatic facilities such as The Health & Wellness Center are able to offer even more options with water-based exercises and healing therapies.

RECOGNIZING DIFFERENT NEEDS

Many middle aged and out-of-condition men and women may also shy away from the typical fitness center whose advertising seems geared to attract those seeking 'The Body Beautiful.' The perception is that youth (and spandex) reigns at these facilities, leaving many to feel like they're on the outside looking in. A peek into most medical fitness centers, however, finds exercisers of all ages, shapes, abilities, and even workout gear, making these types of centers much more comfortable and welcoming. "You won't find a fashion show here," laughs Vida. "Most of our members enjoy working out here because they're not intimidated by the environment. They can focus on their health and make friends with others who are like them."

While medical fitness centers aren't strictly for older exercisers, staff members there are often more aware of the special needs of this population. Additionally, medical fitness facilities are designed for greater safety and accessibility. The International Council of Active Aging (ICAA) in partnership with the American Academy of Family Physicians has created the Age-Friendly Facility program designed to help exercisers and physicians locate facilities that meet these higher standards. "The goal of the Age-Friendly Facility program is to increase participation by older adults in physical activity by making it easier for them to find outstanding

centers that have demonstrated a commitment to providing age-appropriate programs and facilities," says Colin Milner, CEO of the ICAA. In Pennsylvania, the Fitness Center at the Health & Wellness Center was the first to be recognized with this special designation.

"If people really want to get healthy and stay that way, it's time they stop equating fitness with beauty," notes Milner. "It's only when the emphasis shifts from perfection to prevention and wanting a better, healthier life that change begins to occur." That's exactly what exercisers of all ages and abilities are achieving at medical fitness centers.

Dr. Dennis Tafflin is with Central Bucks Family Practice. For more information about the Health & Wellness Center, go to www.wellnessdh.org or call 215-918-5990. Fitness Center hours: Monday – Thursday 5:30 am – 10:00pm, Friday 5:30am – 8:00pm, Saturday and Sunday 7:00am – 7:00pm

For more information about the Age-Friendly Facility program of the ICAA, go to www.icaa.cc.



Judy Chang Cody, Principal of Cody Marketing, is a strategic planning and marketing consultant to the health care, fitness and wellness, and consumer products industries. She also works as a chauffeur and short order cook for her four masters, er, sons. She can be reached at codymktg@aol.com.