

# Keeping independent exercisers safe

All fitness activities have risks that need to be managed. But it's not just the type of activity that increases the chance of injury; it's also the way people choose to exercise.

While exercising independently is desirable to many people, fitness centres still have a responsibility to maintain a safe environment for everyone.

## New member induction

When new members join a fitness centre they're often keen to jump straight into exercising. However, for everyone's safety an induction process is essential.

Take the time to show each person around the centre and discuss the services offered. Be sure they're clear about safety information such as instructions for using equipment and where to return it after use.

New members should also be offered the assistance of a trained exercise professional to help them develop a safe exercise program. This includes a pre-exercise screening assessment (see below).

## Pre-exercise screening

The *Adult Pre-exercise Screening System Tool (APSS Tool)* was developed by Fitness Australia, Exercise & Sports Science Australia and Sports Medicine Australia. The tool helps to identify people who may suffer from medical conditions that increase the risk of harm when exercising. The outcome of the screening assessment helps exercise professionals to prescribe exercises appropriate to the individual's needs. This may include recommending the member seek medical advice prior to beginning exercise.

## Safely manage equipment

When purchasing equipment, it's important to think carefully about how it will be used and stored. People need adequate space around equipment to allow them to adjust settings and weights to suit their needs. If they're too close to other people or equipment, they're at risk of causing injury to themselves or someone else.

It's vital that all equipment is well maintained. This requires scheduled regular inspections of equipment to be sure it's in good working order. Some members will notify staff if something isn't working as it should. But you can't rely on this, as some people won't bother to let you know. Therefore,

staff must be vigilant in checking equipment and maintaining a register of each inspection and the actions taken.

Equipment should also be regularly serviced according to manufacturer instructions to avoid breakdowns. Again, this should be monitored and recorded.

## Supervision

Many gym members are quite happy working independently and don't want to engage a personal trainer. However they may increase their risk of injury if they use incorrect techniques, or don't fully understand how to set up and use equipment.

Having suitably qualified staff available to assist members where necessary provides a great benefit to people exercising independently. It also helps the centre know their members are exercising safely. However, having staff at reception that can assist when asked doesn't fully meet this need. It's important to have assigned staff members walking around the centre so they are visible and approachable for those exercising.

## Communicate safety messages

Staff need to be mindful that what's obvious or common sense to them may not be so obvious to their members! Members often don't have the same level of skill or training in health and fitness that staff do, and will therefore need information about exercising safely regularly communicated to them.

Equipment should display information advising how to use it correctly and safely. Some equipment comes with this information from the manufacturer. However you may wish to consider providing additional safety information if required.

If there's a period of time where additional hazards are present, such as during renovations or cleaning, people must be alerted to the increased danger. This includes being

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clear about what equipment and areas of the centre are prohibited from use.

### Introduction of new services

The health and fitness industry is incredibly dynamic and constantly evolving. Many of the activities being offered in centres today were unheard of 5 to 10 years ago. Advances create new opportunities and challenges for members, yet should always be implemented with care.

If you are installing new equipment or offering a new exercise class, take the time to stop and think about what's required to do it safely.

- Is the equipment designed for use in fitness centres, or is it more suited to personal use?
- Do you have room for the new piece of equipment?
- Where is the safest place to position it?
- Are modifications to the surrounding area needed to ensure there's adequate space?
- Has the equipment been installed according to the manufacturer's instructions?
- Do you have the right staff with the necessary skills to offer the new service?
- What education do staff need?
- What education do members need?
- What are the risks – e.g. injury, property damage, theft, etc.?
- Does the equipment need to be added to the centre's asset register?
- How will you maintain the equipment over time?

Addressing these questions will assist you to implement new initiatives safely.

### Special member deals

Many fitness centres offer special deals to attract new or lapsed members. Deals might include free trial memberships for a few days, or a 'bring-a-friend day'. All businesses understandably want to do what they can to increase their customer base however this needs to be done safely.

- If a person is using a free trial deal, what sort of induction do they receive regarding the centre, its equipment and services offered?
- If they only have a few days in which to exercise for free, how much time is available to undertake a pre-exercise screening assessment?

Fitness centres need to be sure that when offering special deals and benefits they're not creating unnecessary risks.

### Final word!

Members shouldn't be discouraged from exercising independently as this is what suits many people. However fitness centres must remain vigilant about what they can do to make this experience safe for their members.

For more information visit

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