

Managing risks when exercising independently.

It's widely recognised that all fitness activities carry an element of risk that needs to be managed. One area of risk within a fitness centre is not just the activity the member is taking part in, but how they're taking part. Many people go to a fitness centre to workout independently, without guidance from a personal trainer or instructor. While exercising independently has many benefits, centres should be aware of the potentially heightened risk this creates.

New member induction

When new members join your fitness centre they'll usually be quite keen to jump straight into exercising. However, for everyone's safety it's best that there's an induction process. Take the time to show them around the centre and discuss the services offered. Be sure they're clear about centre safety information such as instructions for using equipment and where to put equipment after use.

Developing an exercise program for new members with the assistance of a professional should be offered to ensure they're exercising safely. During this period a pre-exercise screening assessment (discussed below) should be undertaken.

Pre-exercise screening

An Australian adult pre-exercise screening tool has been developed by AUSactive, Exercise & Sports Science Australia and Sports Medicine Australia. The purpose of this tool is to help identify people who may suffer from medical conditions which puts them at an increased risk when exercising. The knowledge gained from this tool assists centres and trainers to ensure exercises prescribed are appropriate for that individual. This information may also guide a fitness centre to recommend a new member seeks medical advice prior to beginning exercise.

Safely manage equipment

When purchasing equipment, it's important to think about where that equipment will be stored. Members need adequate space around equipment to allow them to adjust settings and weights to suit them. If people are too close to others or equipment while doing this, they're at risk of causing an injury to themselves or another person.

It's vital that all equipment is well maintained. This requires scheduled regular inspections of equipment to be sure it's in correct working order. Some members will notify staff if something isn't

working as it should. However you can't rely on this as some people won't think to inform you. It's therefore up to staff to be vigilant when checking equipment and to have a register for recording the inspections carried out. Equipment should also be regularly serviced according to manufacturer instructions to avoid breakdowns. Again, these services should be recorded.

Supervision

Many gym members are quite happy working independently and don't want to engage a personal trainer. However, this can lead to issues as they may have an incorrect technique which could lead to an injury or simply a lack of benefit. They also may not fully understand how to set up and use some pieces of equipment.

Having suitably qualified staff available within the fitness centre to assist members where necessary, provides a great benefit to members working independently. It would also mean the centre will know their members are exercising safely. Having staff at reception that can assist when asked doesn't fully meet this need. It's advisable to have assigned staff members walking around the fitness centre, so they're visible and approachable for those exercising.

Unsupervised hours

If your business includes unsupervised hours, you need to be mindful of the additional potential risks this brings.

As mentioned already, member induction is important to be sure members understand how to safely use the facility and equipment. However, this becomes more important when members will be exercising without any staff member present as this means there's no one for them to direct questions to. Members also need to be informed of what to do in case of an emergency. They should know where the first aid supplies are kept and how to activate panic alarms.

It's recommended that businesses operating with unsupervised hours refer to the recommendations by AUSactive which can be found at ausactive.org.au/policies-guidelines/recommendations-for-unsupervised-health-and-fitness-facilities. It's also recommended that businesses check their insurance policies to be sure they understand what's covered and any conditions or exclusions that might apply.

Communicate safety messages

Staff within a fitness centre need to be mindful of the fact that what's obvious or common sense to them might not be so obvious to their members. The members will quite often not have the same level of skill or training in health and fitness that staff have 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, information about these hazards needs to be communicated to members.

Members should be made aware if there are areas of the centre they aren't to use or equipment that is out of use.

Introduction of new services

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

If you're installing a new piece of equipment or offering a new class, you need to stop and think about how it will be done safely. How will existing members know how to use the equipment, what do you need to explain to them and how will you do this? Do you have room for the new piece of equipment? Are there risks to your members if it's unintentionally misused? Do you have the right staff with the necessary skills to offer the new service?

Answering these safety questions will assist a fitness centre to implement new initiatives in a way which is safe and appropriate.

Special deals

Many fitness centres offer special deals to attract new or lapsed members. 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 coming in to a fitness centre 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 risks for the people involved.



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