

MARKETPLACE

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Ways to Make Sure Your Personal Trainer Will Be on Your Side

BABY BOOMERS trying to get buff have boosted gym attendance. But they have also created a boom in injuries—and with them some injury lawsuits—at the hands of uncredentialed and underinsured trainers.

Asking about liability insurance is one of the criteria to use in picking a personal trainer, along with checking certification and the content of the fitness program itself. Professionals won't be offended by such questions.

Like an uninsured motorist, a trainer without coverage just isn't prepared for the occasional accident. "A free-weight dumbbell, which a trainer was handing to a client, somehow dropped and broke her nose. That ended up costing \$25,000 in claims," says Jim Foley a Chico, Calif., insurance broker who handles trainer policies.

David Herbert, a Canton, Ohio, litigator, also urges making sure your gym has an emergency plan, and your trainer knows how to perform cardiopulmonary resuscitation. "Most injuries and deaths occur through deficiencies in the emergency plan," he says.

Of course, it's best to minimize the chances of any emergency by avoiding being mismatched with your trainer. An overzealous trainer can hurt you.

A personal trainer is supposed to guide you through the maze of exercises and equipment, designing a program that suits your goals. But be aware almost anyone can call himself or herself a trainer. There is no national licensing program. The burden is on the consumer to research a trainer's credentials, certification, references and liability insurance.

Before pulling on your sweats, ask your gym or health club for its file of trainers' resumes. Look for a trainer with education and experience that merits your trust.

ACADEMIC DEGREES in a fitness-related field, while not absolutely necessary, can give trainers an edge. Someone with a bachelor's degree in a field like exercise physiology, kinesiology (the science of movement) or physical education is a good bet.

Trainer-certification programs abound—250 to 300 by some estimates. But many are dubious, consisting of little more than a one-day course, or a mail-order program.

Among widely respected certification programs are ones offered by the American College of Sports Medicine in Indianapolis; the American Council on Exercise in San Diego; the Cooper Institute for Aerobics Research in Dallas; the National Strength and Conditioning Association, in Colorado Springs, Colo.; and the Aerobics Fitness Association of America, in Sherman Oaks, Calif. (There are countless good programs, but many consider these the gold standard.)

Plan to interview the best candidates, says Susan Johnson, continuing-education director at the Cooper Institute. "Be careful if anyone is trying to sell you vitamins, or pushing products like exercise equipment," she adds.

Seek good chemistry. "You are

entrusting your body to a stranger. Be sure you're simpatico," says Laura Greenfield, coordinator of trainer hiring for Club One Fitness Centers in San Francisco.

"I myself was injured by a trainer 15 years ago," she recalls. Assigned to a piece of Nautilus equipment too big for her 5-foot-1-inch frame, she injured her rotator-cuff muscle. "It took me months to recover," she says.

Once you've interviewed and hired your trainer, the table is



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turned. You get interviewed about your health and medical history, previous exercise level, special needs and fitness goals. If you have cardiovascular risk factors such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol, sedentary lifestyle, tobacco use or a family history of heart disease, you should see a physician before starting an exercise program. Some physicians will give an exercise test before clearing you to work out.

THE TRAINER should give you a fitness evaluation on a treadmill to check your aerobic capacity, or a skin-fold test to determine your percentage of body fat if weight loss is part of your plan.

Tell your trainer about old injuries or other physical limitations. Paul Canavan, director of physical therapy and rehabilitation at Penn State University, University Park, Pa., treats the casualties of cookie-cutter training programs. One example: "A person who had had cervical spinal fusion three years earlier was given the same exercise as her friend who had no spinal problems," he says.

Set realistic goals. Trainers use the acronym SMART, for specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and time-bound. Promise yourself, for example, that by Jan. 1, you will have exercised three to four times a week for 30 to 45 minutes, blending cardiovascular or aerobic exercise, conditioning or weight training and stretching or flexibility. Turn a jaundiced eye on trainers who promise to vaporize love handles—chances are they're genetic.

Richard Cotton, spokesman for ACE, suggests tempering fantasy with reality in your goals. Above all, don't use the number on the scale as your primary index of success, he adds.

Demand professionalism. It is vital that trainers dress professionally while supervising your workout, says Ann Partlow, certification director for the American College of Sports Medicine. A trainer in skintight revealing clothes, seems more a hobbyist than someone dedicated to your fitness and safety, she says.

"We have self-proclaimed personal trainers who many times are just individuals interested in fitness themselves," she adds. "They could be putting someone in jeopardy. That's why consumers need to get sophisticated about this."