

Gyms Are Going Gray

Seniors now fastest growing segment of health club industry

By JACQUELINE STENSON

In the fitness world, which so often seems dominated by young, hard bodies in Spandex, an unlikely group is rapidly increasing its presence: seniors.

Industry experts say people in their golden years now represent the fastest growing segment of the health club population.

Statistics from the International Health, Racquet and Sportsclub Association (IHRSA) show that people over age 55 account for about 17 percent of gym-goers. In 2004, there were 10.2 million health club members over 55, up from 4.9 million in 1998 and 1.8 million in 1993.

"It's a huge change," says Brooke MacInnis Correia, a spokesperson for IHRSA, based in Boston.

She says baby boomers are one of the major driving factors. As they age, they're hoping to hang onto their health — and their looks — for as long as possible.

Janie Clark, an exercise physiologist and president of the American Senior Fitness Association in New Smyrna Beach, Fla., isn't surprised that health club clientele is becoming increasingly gray.

"We've been expecting a boom because of the demographics, because of the baby boomers getting older and the aging of the population," Clark says.

Senior-specific classes

Many fitness chains still target young people, but some of them have begun reaching out to seniors, according to Clark. Some offer senior-specific classes such as chair

aerobics or low-impact dance classes. And regular water workouts, yoga and tai chi are always popular, she says.

Another way some clubs cater to seniors is by offering these classes in the late-morning hours, after the rush of the working crowd. "It's a wonderful time to utilize the facility for people who might be retired and can come that hour of the day," says Clark.

A recent survey by the IDEA Health and Fitness Association, which represents fitness managers and instructors, shows that nearly half of the group's members polled say they offer senior-specific programming, such as classes that are scheduled for seniors in non-peak hours, aimed at arthritis sufferers, modified for an aging body, or that include music that appeals to an older crowd.

Many seniors who exercise choose to do so at a YMCA or community center, Clark notes. Country clubs are another option, albeit usually a pricey one.

At the Washington Golf and Country Club in Arlington, Va., about a third of those working out in the facility's gym are over 60, says Jerry Hart, the director of fitness.

The oldest member is 97. "That's not that unusual anymore," Hart says.

Hart, who is 62, says the fact that he is working in his current job is a sign that the fitness industry is becoming more senior-friendly. "Ten years ago I wouldn't have been here," he says.

Many members are focused on working out so they can stay in their game, be it

tennis or golf, he says. Others realize that if they don't get some activity, their quality of life will diminish.

Experts say that people who keep active can help themselves to remain mobile and independent as they age.

More than just age alone

Hart offers a chair-based exercise class, along with yoga and Pilates, but he says many seniors are out on the floor doing what their younger counterparts are doing — treadmill, bench presses and more — maybe just on an easier level.

Of course, some older exercisers keep pace better than others, he says, so "we program the individual not the age."

This concept also is in practice at Matrix Fitness Centers, with four locations in New Jersey and New York. These centers are affiliated with local hospitals, and trainers and doctors work together to develop and monitor a person's fitness regimen, says president Dan Lynch.

Members are put through a battery of tests to assess their health status and fitness level, and to determine their "body age," says Lynch. Then, an individualized exercise program is devised.

When Lynch opened the first center in Pompton Lakes, N.J., a year and a half ago, he says it was aimed at aging boomers and seniors. But now there's a wider range of clients, including overweight

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teens and new moms trying to shed the baby fat after delivery.

The intimidation factor

He says mainstream health clubs simply may not appeal to a lot of people, including seniors.

“The intimidation factor is huge in that age bracket,” says Lynch.

Cedric Bryant, chief exercise physiologist for the American Council on Exercise in San Diego, agrees. He says that overall, health clubs haven’t done a great job of attracting seniors or developing age-appropriate programming for them.

“There’s much more opportunity to better serve that market,” he says.

This is why no-frills chains like Curves, which appeal to older, less fit individuals, have been so popular, he says.

For seniors interested in starting a fitness regimen, Clark, of the American Senior Fitness Association, recommends getting a check-up first. “If they’ve been sedentary, they need to get medical clearance from their personal physician,” she says.

Then, start slowly, such as with a walking or swimming program, if doctor-approved.

In general, Clark advises against step aerobics for seniors because of potential issues with balance and depth perception. And she recommends low-impact activities that are easy on the joints.

Clark also cautions that some activities that seem safe might not be. Certain yoga positions, for instance, may require stretching a joint too far, she says, so it’s important to seek out an instructor who takes senior health issues into account. Seniors also should talk with a personal trainer at their health club about which equipment is safe. Lynch says his clubs use specialized equipment with larger numbers and hand grips that are easier for people with arthritis.

For those who prefer to skip health clubs altogether, there’s always walking around the neighborhood or at home with a yoga or Pilates video.

And one equipment company, Continuing Fitness in Lake Forest, Calif., is just coming out with a line of home equipment for seniors. Their first product, the Resistance Chair, allows users to strengthen their muscles with resistance provided through cables.

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