

FROM THE EXPERTS

Build a Home Gym You'll Actually Use

From Harvard Medical School's Harvard Heart Letter.

EVERY YEAR, THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE BUY fitness club memberships, hoping that the bright lights, glitzy machines and peppy instructors will propel them out of their exercise ennui. But sizable portions of new patrons fail to show up at the gym after a month or so, having slimmed their pocketbooks but not their waistlines.

Because aerobic exercise is crucial to heart health, it's important to find another way to

get motivated to move on a regular basis. For some people, setting up a home gym may be a more convenient and affordable option.

PLAN YOUR PROGRAM

"An effective exercise routine has to be enjoyable as well as meet your basic fitness requirements," says Dr. Elizabeth Frates, director of wellness programming at Harvard-affiliated Spaulding Rehabilitation Hospital. For optimal health, you need at least 150 minutes weekly of aerobic activity vigorous enough to speed up your heartbeat and bring out a

light sweat. In addition, you should follow a strength-training program that works all your major muscle groups at least twice a week on nonconsecutive days. Finally, adding stretching and balance movements can help you stay flexible and prevent falls.

If you have the space, consider a dedicated aerobics machine, such as a treadmill, stationary bike or elliptical stepper (see Kiplinger's recommendations below). Before you invest in a piece of exercise equipment, visit a sporting-goods store to check out the durability and feel of the item you want.

Choose the Right Machine for You

We shopped for home-gym equipment that has earned good reviews from fitness experts, specialty publications and consumers alike. Prices for most of the machines fall in the \$1,000-to-\$2,000 range. You can find dealers in your area on manufacturers' websites. Dealers set their own prices, but most will negotiate. Before you buy, spend at least 10 minutes on a machine to test it out.

You may be able to snag a deal on remanufactured or refurbished commercial equipment, says Pete McCall, a certified trainer and spokesman for the American Council on Exercise. Such machines may cost more than new equipment designed for residential use but will last for years if properly maintained, he says. Ask the dealer how it reconditioned the machine: Was it overhauled or just touched up? Manufacturers' warranties typically don't convey with reconditioned exercise equipment, but the Fitness Superstore (www.fitnesssuperstore.com) remanufactures a variety of commercial and residential equipment and sells it with a 90-day warranty.

PATRICIA MERTZ ESSWEIN



Exercise bike

For a solid, well-built bike at an affordable price, check out the **LIFECORE FITNESS ASSAULT AIRBIKE** (\$999 plus shipping in the continental U.S.; www.lifecorefitness.com). The LifeCORE is an air (or fan) bike, similar to the Schwinn Airdyne—the faster you pedal and push and pull the handlebars, the greater the resistance. The console displays your performance (speed, revolutions per minute, time, watts and calories) and your heart rate. You can pick from two interval-training programs.

Home gym

LIFE FITNESS G2 HOME GYM (\$1,499, recently with free shipping; www.life-fitness.com). Once you have cardio covered, add strength training. For an experience similar to what you'll find at a real gym, check out the space-saving Life Fitness G2. It lets you exercise muscle groups by pushing or pulling padded bars or straps that connect via cables and pulleys to 160 pounds of stacked weights. Sitting or standing, you can do 25 exercises for the back, shoulders, chest, abdomen, arms, hips and legs. Options include a leg press for more exercises (\$698) and an extra 50 pounds of weights (\$79).



Be sure to “test-drive” different machines to make sure you’re comfortable performing the exercise. Bargain hunters may be able to find secondhand exercise machines at a reasonable price.

Because these items are notorious for turning into idle dust catchers, Dr. Frates advises that you make sure you truly like an activity, such as running or biking, before investing in a large piece of equipment. The same wisdom applies when it comes to strength training. Start with simple, inexpensive items, such as a couple of sets of small barbells in different weights. Strap on weight-filled ankle cuffs while doing leg lifts or step-ups to build lower-body strength. “The trick to effective strength training using weights is to master the proper form,” says Dr. Frates. Therefore, she strongly suggests adding a how-to video to your workout kit.

You can find many good options online from sources such as the American Council on Exercise (www.acefitness.org; click on “Exercise Library”) and the Go4Life program at the National Institute on Aging (<https://go4life.nia.nih.gov>; click on “Get Free Stuff”).

Another handy item for resistance training is an elastic exercise band that harnesses your own body weight to build muscle strength. These bands often come in sets of four or five that range from very stretchy to heavy-duty resistance. If you’re an experienced weight trainer with the money and the floor space to spare, a so-called home gym unit may be your choice. These compact machines offer a wide variety of upper- and lower-body strengthening exercises using a system of cables and stacked weights. If you go this route, it may be worthwhile to hire a personal trainer for a few

sessions to help you design your workout and to learn the proper form and technique with each part of the machine.

“Before launching into setting up your home gym, you first have to set up your mind,” says Dr. Frates. Knowing your personal goals—whether they include lowering your cholesterol, playing with your grandchildren or improving your golf game—is the first step toward making your program successful. Ultimately, it’s your commitment to changing your behavior—not just your spiffy new exercise setup—that will keep you going. “Just because you buy the latest and greatest piece of exercise equipment doesn’t mean you will use it,” says Dr. Frates. ■

For more information about Harvard Medical School’s Harvard Heart Letter, visit www.health.harvard.edu/newsletters/harvard_heart_letter.



Elliptical cross-trainer

PRECOR EFX 222 (recently offered for \$2,195, plus \$199 for delivery and installation; www.precor.com). Precor invented the elliptical, which offers an effective cardio workout with less stress on the knees, hips and back than running on a treadmill, says Edward Laskowski, co-director of the Mayo Clinic Sports Medicine Center. The EFX 222 is a rear-drive machine, which has the most ergonomically realistic action, with three inclines and 16 resistance levels. Moving handlebars exercise your arms and core. It comes with 10 preset workouts with the ability to store two user preferences.

Rower

CONCEPT2 MODEL D (\$900 plus \$45 shipping in the contiguous U.S., \$130 in Alaska and Hawaii; www.concept2.com). Rowers provide aerobic conditioning and work the arms, abdomen, back and legs. And the Concept2 is “the gold standard for indoor rowers,” says McCall. It uses a covered flywheel with a damper to adjust airflow and change resistance, which makes operation smooth and quiet. The rower comes with performance and heart-rate monitors. Its single, ergonomically designed handle is easy to hold. Correct technique isn’t difficult, but it is essential, especially if you have lower-back issues (see the Concept2 videos on YouTube).



Treadmill

TRUE M30 (\$1,999 plus \$299 for delivery and installation; www.truefitness.com). The True M30 has speeds from 0.5 to 12 miles per hour and inclines up to 15 degrees. For runners, the treadmill provides a firmer surface in back for push-off and a softer surface in front, where foot impact takes place. The machine has sensors to monitor your heart rate, and the console provides nine preprogrammed workouts, including one that adjusts speed and incline as needed to maintain a constant heart rate. Safety features include a safety clip that turns off the machine if you fall or step off.