

How to pick a gym

You've made the resolution: you're finally going to get fit.

For some, motivation or mobility aren't the problem. It's logistics. How can I find a workout location that fits my needs? Clare Spires, an exercise physiologist at OSF HealthCare, has a "gym-picking" checklist.

- Distance from home: If long drives are tough (perhaps you have a disability, childcare concerns or live in an area with rough weather year-round), consider sacrificing quality for proximity.

"I'm a checklist person. So write it down and make it one thing you can check off for your day," Spires says about finding the spark to make the drive to the gym. "Set an alarm on your phone. Have someone to go with you and motivate you. Give yourself a prize at the end of the week [for meeting workout goals]."

- Equipment: Some people might just need a treadmill. Some might just want weights. Others might want everything. More amenities typically mean a bigger gym and a higher cost, Spires says.
- Hours: Do you work odd hours and need a gym open at night? Checking the facility's hours before you sign up is a must, Spires says. But, she says, there's a flip side to a gym open 24/7. If you can go anytime, there might be less motivation as opposed to the urgency of "I need to get there before 5 p.m."
- Privacy and crowds: Are you comfortable with communal locker rooms and showers, or do you want privacy? Ask to look at these areas on a tour. Ask about options to store your belongings. Are there lockers? If so, are they free?

Or, do you get anxious in large crowds? Ask gym staff about peak hours and typically how many people are present then.

- Cleanliness: The last thing you want is an illness or infection to derail your fitness journey.

"Are the locker rooms and bathrooms clean? Do you see staff going around and cleaning equipment? Are they dusting?" Spires says.

- Price: Do your research, Spires says. Some gyms offer the first week or month free, and you can see if it's a good fit without breaking the bank. Or, ask if the gym offers discounts, such as for seniors, military, students or low-income residents.

But, be wary of day passes, Spires says. It might be the way to go if, for example, you're on vacation. But for your home gym, it might be better savings-wise to just get the long-term membership.

- Signing up and canceling: We've all seen the headlines about how meticulous it is to fill out gym contracts. In fact, several states have passed laws to make the process easier.

"Talk about that up front with gym staff. Read the fine print," Spires suggests. "If you go to a smaller, locally-owned gym or a recreation center [as opposed to big chain gyms], those are going to be easier to pay month-to-month."

- Word of mouth: Take everything you see online with a grain of salt, but it can't hurt to read gym reviews and even bring those up when touring with staff. Friends and family might also have advice.