

Taking part in an exercise program — your rights and responsibilities

By Anita M. Myers, PhD, University of Waterloo

You have the right to expect safe and beneficial programs that are tailored to your needs, abilities and goals. This is true whether you join a commercial fitness club, a program at your local “Y,” or one at a seniors recreation centre. You have the right to good programs whether you pay directly through fees, or indirectly through your taxes. You also have the right to look around and ask questions before you join, such as:

Getting there: Is there parking or access to public transport? Is it easy to walk there? Are the entrances well lit, even, and cleared of snow?

Options: Are the scheduled times and days convenient for you? Can you try out classes or groups before joining? Switch classes later?

Costs: Are there any fees? Will you need any special clothing, footwear or exercise equipment? Do you need a fitness appraisal or a doctor’s permission? If so, what will these cost you?

Staff: Are they welcoming and helpful? Are the instructors trained to work with older adults? Have they talked to you about your expectations?

Facilities: Are washrooms nearby? Are there sitting areas, change rooms?

Other participants: How many people will be in the class or group? Do you like the mix of ages and the balance of men and women?

The answers to such questions can help you decide whether particular facilities or programs seem right for you and help you choose between programs.

The right to give feedback

Even if you check out a program beforehand, once you join, you may still have problems from time to time. For instance, you may find the room too hot or too cold, have trouble hearing or seeing the instructor,



or find some of the movements frustrating. Don’t give up and leave. Give the program a chance to address your concerns. You may be pointing out something that is bothering many other people too. All active living programs should find ways to make it easy for members to give feedback, such as, suggestion boxes, comment cards, surveys or focus (discussion) groups.

The program’s obligation

In addition to client feedback, programs must collect other evaluation information to ensure they are delivering the best service possible. Program managers and deliverers are accountable to funders, boards of directors, and to you, their clients. Common types of information programs may collect are:

- Background information at registration to learn more about the types of people who prefer certain programs, how they heard about the program, and so on.
- Attendance or sign-in sheets to look at patterns and adjust course offerings and scheduling as needed.
- Phone interviews to offer support and encouragement to absent members or address reasons for drop-out.
- Assessments at the beginning and end of the program to examine possible benefits

of participation such as improved sleep quality or balance.

Why should you give information?

Some information, such as a fitness appraisal or medical forms, may be required before starting a class. Most of the information you give is voluntary. If asked to give information for evaluation purposes, you should seriously consider the request. Many people find it interesting to discuss their impressions or learn more about their abilities (such as balance or strength). Your involvement in the evaluation process is vital to help the program secure funding and meet client expectations, yours as well as those of future participants. Sometimes, this information is shared in summary form to help exercise leaders across the country. You may even be asked to sit on a committee to help plan an evaluation, choose appropriate tools, and develop recommendations based on the findings.

What should you know before giving information?

Telemarketing scams have made us all more careful about giving out personal information, such as addresses or phone numbers. If you are unclear about anything, you have the right to ask questions. You should not feel pressured to agree on the spot.

Before you give information, you should know the following:

- Who is making the request?
- What am I being asked to do?
- How long will it take?
- How will the information be used?
- How will it be kept confidential and secure?
- Will I have the opportunity to ask questions?
- Can I change my mind at any point?
- Do I fully understand any document, such as a consent form, that I am signing?
- Have I been given any written information, such as a copy of the form?
- Have I been given information about who to contact if I have questions or concerns?

Protecting your information

Evaluators and researchers use a number of strategies to protect individual information, for example:

- Using confidential identifiers or codes instead of individual names, to protect your privacy
- Keeping all raw data, such as questionnaires, under lock and key
- Destroying information after the evaluation is completed
- Not releasing names, addresses or phone numbers to any other party
- Not using information for any purpose except those stated on the consent form.

These assurances should be clearly explained on the consent form that you are asked to sign. Thus, you have the right to ask questions before you join a program, the right to give feedback (either good or bad) about the program, and the right to have any information you provide be protected. At the same time, you share the responsibility for ensuring the program is meeting participant needs and expectations by getting involved in the evaluation process.

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