

How to 'Curve' Your Way to a Healthier You

According to their official website, this fitness company is “not just the fastest-growing fitness franchise, but the fastest growing franchise of any kind in history,” with more than 4 million women as members. What am I talking about? Curves for Women, of course!

Curves fitness facilities are popping up all over the place, both nationally and internationally, offering women of all ages and abilities a chance to sweat it out and get healthier.

I had been curious about all the talk and their tagline, “The power to amaze yourself.” *OK*, I thought. *Amaze me*. Plus, I learned that the creator of Curves was a Christian with an awesome testimony.

So, a couple of months ago, I decided to volunteer for a 21-day fitness study with my local Curves center. I thought it would be a good idea for the health producer (that’s me!) to experience this fitness phenomenon firsthand, with the intent of writing about the pros and cons of this workout for people like you who also might be seriously considering trying the Curves plan.

The deal was I would pay my \$20 up front and sign up for nine half-hour supervised workout sessions—that’s three 30-minute sessions per week.. If I stuck with the program until completion, I would get my \$20 back and a chance to get a membership at Curves at a significant reduction. My body fat index, blood pressure and weight would be taken both before and after the study to see what kind of improvement I had made. I figured I really didn’t have anything to lose, except my lack of energy and a little less free time in my schedule.

When I signed up for the Curves study, I was keenly interested

in several factors. One, would I feel a difference in my body tone and energy level in just three weeks? Two, is the Curves workout enjoyable? Three, is this a program that is sustainable long-term? Four, is it comparable to other fitness facilities in price and offerings? And finally, is there room for advancement for those desiring a higher fitness level?

Like a lot of women, I hesitate to belong to a typical gym because I don't like feeling insecure about the way I look or about my fitness ability when Mr. Beef Cake and Miss Hard Abs are pumping iron. It can be intimidating exercising in front of all those beautiful, tanned people. And the machines are likewise gargantuan and not always easy to use. Do you really want to have to ask the busy buff guy at the desk how to work that leg press for the third time, knowing he is going to roll his eyes at you?

The Pros

At Curves, you don't get that. Size and shape aren't an issue, and that was very refreshing. Considering it is a women-only facility, you can relax in your sweats without the threat of glares. Most folks there are friendly and helpful.

You can't possibly be intimidated by the machines since they are very streamlined and very easy to use. No messing with bench adjustments and placing pins at different weights. Sounds like a minor thing, but it saves time and embarrassment. There is nothing more frustrating than having to readjust the weight pin because you still aren't strong enough to lift that weight stack. I honestly never liked the idea that people around me could see that I was only able to lift 10 pounds on those arm machines. Why advertise your weakness?

Curves uses a circuit-training model. The hydraulic machines are ringed in a circle. You have various leg machines, arm machines, tummy crunchers, and waist exercisers. Between each

machine is a shock-absorbing jogging square. The idea is to walk or run on that pad to keep your heart rate up between machine workouts.

You have exactly 30 seconds per machine before you are told to move to the next station. At several points in your workout, you are asked to take a 10-second count of your heart rate. The ideal is to keep your heart rate at 50-60 percent, no higher. There is a chart on the wall that calculates what your heart rate should be based on your age. The music, which is mostly disco-style, pumping music (think upbeat, think Abba) helps set the pace.

In and out in 30 minutes. This is totally doable and it doesn't feel too much like work.

Which was why I was surprised at how toned I began to feel after only about two weeks. I most especially felt the difference in my back, shoulders, arms and thighs. Within the three-week period, I had also decreased my blood pressure and increased my energy level. That's pretty amazing.

Plus, the encouraging, clean, friendly and fun atmosphere goes a long way to motivate you.

The Cons

Now, here's the catch: You get out of the Curves workout what you put into it. That isn't exactly a negative. It depends on how you look at it.

They tell me that hydraulic resistance machines are supposed to be safer, since they are gentler on your joints than traditional machines. And that is very good. The real issue I see is not one of strain when it comes to these hydraulic machines, but rather one of motivation.

Let me explain. Since the machines are hydraulic, the faster you are able to go, the harder you work your body. The faster

you go, the more resistance builds up; the more resistance, the more your body can tone up. So go slowly, and see little improvement. Go fast, and see yourself increase your energy and tone. It depends on you. And if you are lazy that day, you aren't going to get your money's worth.

The other drawback to these hydraulic machines is that you really can only go so fast on these machines. With only 30 seconds to push yourself, and only a certain range of motion, it seems to me that you will eventually reach a plateau point. For some women, that's fine, but for others like me, it's frustrating. What if I want to do more? I am at a loss.

And what happens when your body gets used to the same 30-minute workout, which inevitably happens? Can you change it up or do an hour instead? The answer currently is no. While I understand they likely do that for consistency and to help make the workout doable, it does tend to be a bit one-size-fits-all.

I would love to see this challenged. Why not have two workout circuits: one for beginners, and one for advanced? That way you have another challenge to conquer. The more advanced person could do an hour workout instead of the typical 30-minute version.

On the issue of cost, the price is fairly reasonable and comparable to other fitness clubs—around \$40 per month with an annual sign-up fee. But you don't get what other gyms offer, including things like a pool, a sauna, tennis and basketball courts, team exercise classes and childcare. If you enjoy co-ed interaction and doing lots of different types of exercise or you can't live without the pool, then Curves isn't for you, or you need to incorporate some other form of exercise.

You also have to consider that the hours can be very limited at Curves. Suggested basic hours for new facilities, according to the official Curves website, are Monday–Friday from 9

a.m.–noon and 4–7 p.m. Each Curves facility sets their own hours, and I have personally found the hours at my local Curves are too restrictive.

There are no early morning hours for those who would like to get a workout in before heading to the office, and they are closed for several hours during lunch. Evening hours end at around 8 p.m. I would say that facility is not conducive to working women like me. Hopefully, the facility near you has better hours.

Conclusion

While I enjoyed the workout and managed to keep to the three-week schedule without much effort, I decided not to join. I might change my mind later, and I am known to do that.

I think, for me, I would need other physical activities or to include another gym beyond Curves to keep me challenged. And I also know myself when it comes to fitness: I think I would rather spend the money on dance classes or just exercise at home.

However, if you get the chance to try Curves for free, I would do it. You owe it to yourself to find out what all the hype is about. Who knows? Maybe you'll find the perfect fit.

Laura J. Bagby produces the health and finance channels for . She writes inspirational, humor, singles and health articles.

For the original article, visit .