

Not for male eyes

Mirror image of her blubbery body drives her to set up women-only gym
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Tue, Jun 26, 2007
AsiaOne

Ms Wendy Yeo was a regular at co-ed gyms until a frightening sight she saw in the mirror one day gave her second thoughts about exercising with men around.

"The turning point came after I had my first kid," says Wendy, 35. "I was wearing one of those cropped tops, and I remember sitting in front of the mirror, on the floor doing stretches, and I could just see my fat spilling out!

"Straightaway, the first thing I did was to look around to see if anyone saw that. I'll always remember that mirror and stretching area," she says, shuddering at the memory.

That was when she thought it would be good to work out in a place with no men, "where at least you won't feel so conscious about yourself", says the 1.6m-tall woman, now a svelte 46kg - from a high of 54kg.

This was one of the reasons why she decided to set up FitnessWerkz, a women-only gym in the Raffles Place area. While a gym without the gaze of male eyes is not something new, what makes Wendy's gym somewhat different is that it is a 30-minute circuit gym. Instead of separate areas for cardio exercises and strength-training, they are combined together in a circuit layout.

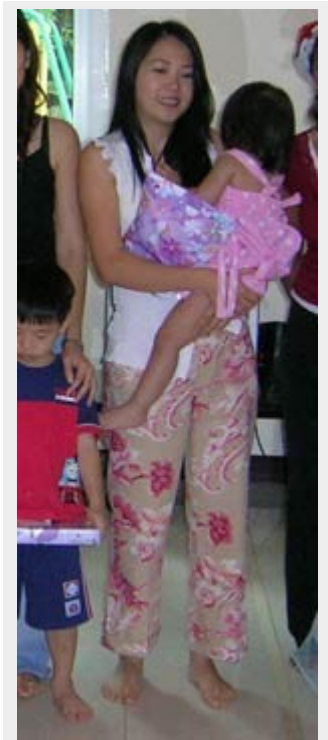
There are 20 stations in the circuit at FitnessWerkz - 10 strength stations and 10 cardio stations - arranged such that the two types of station alternate with each other. The basic workout? Starting at one station, knock out as many reps as you can until the music prompts you - about every 40 seconds -- to move to the next. Complete as many circuits as you can within a 30-minute period - hence the name.

Next, head for a quick shower and it is back to the office before lunch hour is up, or head home where baying kids await. Either way, the gym is very attractive for career women who desire their workout to be as hassle-free as possible, the same way it was for Wendy, an ex-investment banker and now a mother of two girls aged 4 and 6.

It also means no escaping the strength building machines, which women tend to shun. Most women do only aerobic exercises like running and cycling, and while this helps your cardiovascular health, says Wendy, "what it doesn't do is to strengthen up your muscles and joints.

"And from the beauty aspect, a lot of women don't need to lose weight. What they need is to tone up. If you do pure cardio, you'll never really get a very toned body."

She stumbled upon the 30-minute circuit workout when surfing the Internet, and found out it was popular in countries like the US and Australia. On a trip to Australia, she decided to check out one of the circuit gyms,



Wendy after her second child



Wendy today

located on the second floor of what looked like a shop house.

"I was quite taken aback by what I saw. They're all about like that," she said, gesturing at her own circuit. For someone used to the big California and Planet Fitnesses, "it really didn't look impressive. At one glance, you could see everything".

The atmosphere was different too. "You could just sense this homeliness. It's like everyone knew each other.

"When I was working out alone, the members could tell I was new. And they just chatted with me and showed me how to use the machines. You don't get this when you're working out in a mega gym.

"People at mega gyms don't interact with each other. Those who do are friends. There is a lot of posing and everyone has to put up a front. If you dress sloppily, people do give you the eye-over." says Wendy

"Why can't I just be myself?" she implored, like many who have been thus visually dismissed.

And like many, Wendy had always wanted to run a business, but "never really had a great idea". When she discovered the 30-minute gym though, it gave her butterflies in the stomach.

Still, gut feel alone does not a sound investment make, so she did some research, which included surveying 100 women off the streets, both in town and the HDB area. Half of them said the main reason they did not exercise was time. Her survey also showed that as women grew older, they increasingly prefer to exercise in all-women settings.

"While there is nothing wrong with the commercial, co-ed mega gyms," said Wendy, "they do tend to attract a younger crowd, maybe because of the way they're set up.

Another trend she discovered was that the most active women tended to be those aged below 20 -- "it's very obvious; because they're in school" -- and those above 50 -- "because a lot of them are in retirement, and once you hit old age you tend to take better care of yourself".

Yet it is those who fall in between -- the recently married, the new mothers and the career-minded -- who really need to be exercising, said Wendy, or else by 50, they already have problems like knee pain and osteoporosis.

She decided there was a market for quick, fuss-free workouts. So Wendy went for some training courses, including one from the Singapore Sports Council, and put in about \$200,000 to set up FitnessWerkz on Malacca Street a year back. It currently has a staff of four fitness instructors. Interestingly enough, facing FitnessWerkz is mega gym California Fitness.

Besides getting more working women to exercise, a bigger challenge lies ahead. "Exercise and nutrition go hand in hand," explains Wendy, so all her clients get a nutrition programme on top of their exercise routine.

"While getting people to exercise is difficult, it's still easier than getting them to change their diet."

Many do not appreciate that weight gain does not happen in an instant, but over a period of time. For example, consuming an excess of 50 calories a day means an excess of 1,500 calories a month, said Wendy.

And if you think your diet is okay, she suggested listing all the food you eat over two weeks. "Then you see all those guilty smiles when they realise where it went wrong."

"If you want to rely on exercise alone to maintain you shape, you probably have to exercise everyday," she warned.