

# Food in gyms

*The magazine Health Which? recently published this article, which examined the quality and availability of appropriate food and drink in both private and local authority sport and leisure centres. Many centre managers will find it interesting reading...*

BY RACHEL CLEMONS

If you want to exercise to get fit, keep fit, or lose weight, health and fitness clubs and leisure centres are popular places to head for. But do these venues address healthy living across the board, or are they sending out mixed messages? Can you get a free drink of water while you're working out, for example? And once you've showered and changed, do the on-site cafés, bars and vending machines offer healthy options, or simply tempt you with sugary drinks and fatty snacks?

We asked three experts in sports nutrition to visit a range of clubs and centres across the country to see whether they provide the essential basics and address health in a holistic way – through exercise and nutrition. Our visits turned up some examples of good practice. But many places offered little choice in the way of healthy foods and drinks and, worryingly, some venues didn't even provide free drinking water.

## Going to the gym

Whether it's to play badminton, go for a swim or pump weights, more and more of us are joining health and fitness clubs or visiting the local leisure centre. It's estimated that there are between 2,500 and 3,000 health and fitness clubs in the UK, with a similar number of local authority leisure centres, and the number of clubs and club admissions is rising steadily.

In August 2003 we made undercover visits to 32 private health clubs and local authority leisure centres across England. These visits were conducted by our three experts: a lecturer in sports nutrition, and two accredited sports dietitians – one of whom

is also a lecturer in nutrition. The venues included private chains, independents, and private and local authority-managed leisure centres, in a variety of suburban, inner city, or small town locations. Each offered a range of catering options, from vending machines to cafés. Our experts observed and used these facilities, checking on the provision of drinking water, the contents of vending machines, and what was on offer in cafés.

## Catering policies

We wrote to each of the gyms after our visit, to ask about its catering policy, and whether this includes promoting healthy eating. Disappointingly, only nine of the 32 venues responded to our questionnaire. Seven of the nine sold food, but only five said that they promoted healthy eating – by offering healthy options in their cafés. Only a few venues said that they had a specific policy on the food and drinks they sell, but they gave very little detail.

We think it's a poor show that so few of the fitness clubs and leisure centres responded. Clearly, promoting healthy eating is not a priority for the majority of these venues. We think it should be.

## Thirsty work

Easy access to free drinking water is the most basic and important requirement in places where people go to exercise – our experts were clear on this.

Water fountains or coolers should be clearly visible – in prominent positions or signposted – and there should be enough of them so that at least one is easily accessible from each area of the venue. Their design should allow you to fill your own bottle as well as drink from the fountain or cooler.

While the majority of venues our experts visited

offered free drinking water, six of the 32 didn't. And although one of our sports dietitians searched high and low, she couldn't even find water to buy in one of these – Blackwater & Hawley Leisure Centre in Surrey. This is very poor practice. Our experts also agreed that providing drinking advice – reminding people to hydrate before, during and after exercise – is good practice. They found only one venue, Results Health & Leisure Studio in Highams Park, London, displaying posters with these messages. But you had to buy water there, or bring your own.

Our experts made their visits during the summer's recordbreaking high temperatures across the country. One of our sports dietitians said: 'I found it concerning that not one of the centres I visited displayed advice reminding people to drink during exercise.'

## Performance-enhancing sports products

Top-class athletes may need extra energy and nutrients, but most people should get all they need from a balanced diet. So there's usually no need to spend money on specialist products like protein powders and sports supplements such as creatine, to enhance muscle performance. Excess protein is stored as body fat if you don't burn it off, and too much in your diet can put a strain on your kidneys.

Our experts agreed that there's no place for these specialist products in mainstream venues, but found them on sale in a third of the places they visited. Our experts were disappointed to see these products in some branches of the well-known chains: Fitness First, Cannons, LA Fitness, David Lloyd and Esporta. Two other private gyms – Cheetahs Gym in Hove, and Star Health and Fitness in Leeds – sold performance-enhancing supplements, but these venues had an emphasis on bodybuilding.



Isotonic sports drinks, such as Lucozade Sport, Gatorade and Powerade, were available in most of the places we visited. They are designed to hydrate the body during and after exercise, and can help you rehydrate more quickly than water, which can be useful when your fluid needs are high.

But if you drink and eat enough before, during and after sport you're unlikely to need isotonic drinks. The normal rate of absorption of water is fine for most people, particularly if you exercise for less than an hour. The important thing is to drink enough fluid to replace what you lose. Feeling thirsty means you are already dehydrated, so remember to drink regularly.

### Vending machines

Of the 32 health clubs and leisure centres we visited, 26 had vending machines offering drinks, and our experts were generally happy with the choices.

They experts agreed that choice is key. Ideally, these venues should offer a range of chilled drinks to cater for different tastes, so that people can always find something they fancy – otherwise they can become dehydrated.

The experts looked at the availability of sugarfree and non-carbonated options. Most venues sold isotonic drinks such as Lucozade Sport and the majority offered both sugar-free drinks – most commonly Diet Coke and Ribena Light – and non-carbonated choices such as Oasis juice drinks or Lucozade Hydro Active flavoured waters. Although isotonic drinks are not essential, they can help replenish fluids and body salts after exercise.

Our experts said that food vending is definitely an area where there's room for improvement. Of the 18 places with snack vending machines, a sorry 16 didn't provide even one healthy choice.

There's nothing wrong with selling chocolate bars and sweets in places where people go to exercise. These foods can give you an energy boost, and after a hard workout you might want a treat.

But our experts agreed that a snack vending machine should include at least one healthy option – for example cereal bars, rice crackers, pretzels, dried fruit and nuts, individual cereal packs with milk, and low-fat yogurts. These are all well suited to vending machines and are good alternatives to the ubiquitous crisps and chocolate bars.

Vending machines at Acton Swimming Baths and Finsbury Leisure Centre – both local authority leisure centres in London – offered mainly snacks like crisps and chocolate bars. But they did give you the option of cutting fat by choosing Jaffa Cakes, or eating more fibre by going for oat flapjacks.

### Cafés

Two thirds of venues had a bar or café, ranging from the very basic, offering a selection of drinks and snacks, to near-restaurants serving meals à la carte. Our experts agreed that, whatever the size, choice is what's important – these cafés are trying to cater for many tastes, and not everyone is watching their weight. But at least one healthy, low-fat option for both snacks and meals should be available.

All of these venues offered a choice of drinks – usually similar to those in vending machines. Some

## 'All venues should promote healthy eating and those that serve food should have a policy that addresses this'

also sold fruit juices or smoothies, which pleased our experts. These drinks are a good energy source and count as one of the recommended five portions of fruit and veg you should have each day. But our experts were disappointed that not all staff could direct them towards low-fat choices, when asked.

Our experts thought that snacks available from cafés were a distinct improvement on what you could buy from vending machines, with only one place not offering a healthy option. But fruit was only on sale in 13 of the 19 cafés.

A shining example in the snack stakes was the local authority-run Dolphin Leisure Centre in Haywards Heath. Its café offered items such as low-fat yogurts, Snackajack rice snacks, breakfast cereals and a selection of fruits. Esporta in Crawley and the Brook Green Holmes Place in London also hit the spot by selling fruit, and sandwiches and baguettes with low-fat fillings made to order.

Our experts said that cafés should offer a good range of starchy foods, such as pasta, rice, bread and potatoes, but only half of the ones we looked at met this standard. When foods such as salads or pasta come pre-mixed with fatty mayonnaise, sauces or dressings, it can hugely inflate the amount of fat you eat. On the surface, 'help yourself' salad bars can look healthy, but if everything is pre-mixed with high fat dressings, it's merely an illusion of choice. Served separately, people can add as little or as much dressing as they like, or even go without. Our experts were pleased to find that over half of the cafés served mayonnaise and dressings on the side.

To help you choose well, healthy options should be easily visible and attractively presented. A wilting salad, tucked between the chips and burgers is not appealing. Kitchens should take a healthy approach by steaming, grilling, baking or microwaving food, rather than serving up everything deep-fried.

At Parkland Leisure Centre in Leicester, our lecturer in sports nutrition couldn't find a meal on the menu that she considered to be healthy. Chips were the only form of potatoes available, and even though beans and chips was on offer, our expert was told that the café 'couldn't do' beans on toast – a far healthier alternative.

Aside from a baked potato with beans, our lecturer in sports nutrition thought you'd be hard pushed to find a healthy meal at Garforth Squash & Leisure Centre and Scott Hall Sports Centre, in Leeds. She said: 'Meals are mainly basic fast foods with high-fat mayonnaise-loaded fillings, and chips with practically everything.'

Two venues stood out for quality. Our sports dietitian, who also lectures in nutrition, visited Greens in Chingford, Greater London. 'It's the gold standard for what can be achieved by a large private chain, which could perhaps be scaled down for smaller private and local authority facilities,' she said. Meals contained plenty of starchy foods and included wraps with low fat fillings, soup, jacket potatoes, salads, pasta, stir-fry, beans on toast, omelettes and grilled steak. Staff were helpful and

offered to adapt dishes to her needs by leaving out butter and mayonnaise, for example.

David Lloyd, in Leeds, was praised by our sports nutrition lecturer for its 'extensive and adventurous café menu,' which included a calorie count on the 'light and tasty' selection. It had a good kids' menu and a positive approach to healthy eating.

Just over half of the cafés serving meals had kids' menus. But a third of these didn't offer a healthy option, and on some occasions children's meals were of worse nutritional value than those on the standard menu. There's a huge opportunity for health clubs and leisure centres to send out clear messages about healthy eating. So if a kids' menu is on offer, it's vital that there's a healthy option and a choice of drinks such as fruit juice or a milk drink – not just fizzy soft drinks.

Kids' meals also need to be well presented. Our sports nutrition lecturer took her nine-year-old on most visits. She said: 'We were generally unimpressed and uninspired by the meal options, and the presentation was not good.'

### Lack of healthy eating advice

Our experts didn't see any healthy eating messages on display during their visits. In terms of health, exercise and nutrition go hand-in-hand, so there's definite room for improvement at all of these venues. The British Nutrition Foundation (BNF), and the Food Standards Agency (FSA) both produce healthy eating information that could be displayed in these clubs and centres. The FSA produces free leaflets, the BNF has posters for £1 each, and both have free healthy eating information on their websites. Some private health clubs we visited offered consultations on diet or weight loss. This could be useful, but check that whoever provides this advice is properly qualified.

### Verdict

Health clubs and leisure centres promote good health. But some forget that eating and drinking well is an important part of being healthy. As a minimum, free drinking water should be available. And where food and other drinks are sold, there should be a choice that includes healthy options.

Small changes can make a big difference – such as having healthy snacks in vending machines, and serving a wider range of starchy foods like pasta, and thick-sliced bread for sandwiches. Selling fruit and fruit salads, incorporating more vegetables into meals, offering lower-fat options, and serving sauces and dressings separately is equally important.

We think all health and fitness venues should promote healthy eating, and those offering food and drink should have a policy that addresses this. The best practice guidelines outlined in this report would be a good place for them to start. ●

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