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The Record

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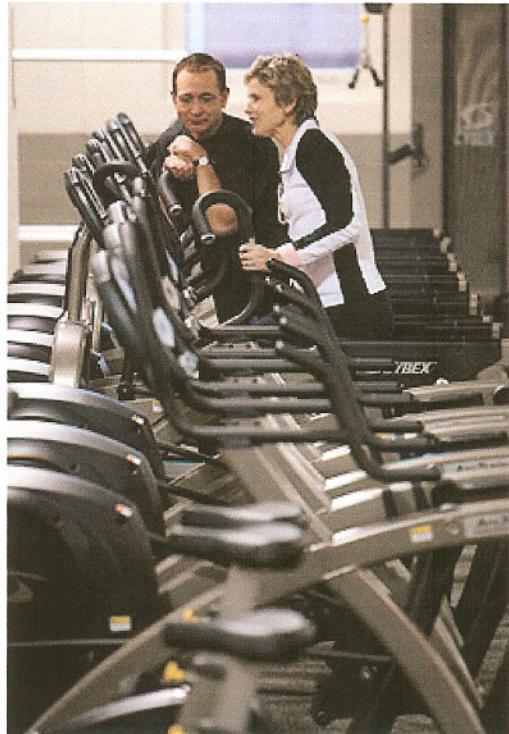
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Holy Name Hospital opened a \$4.5 million fitness center in Oradell this month, designed for people who see exercise as a path to health, not a hot date.

This brand of gym, a "medical fitness center," targets people who are new to exercise, recovering from injuries or operations, or have been ordered by their doctors to get in shape. The center also wants members who already chant the mantra "Exercise Is Good for You."

"We're told every day that exercise is such an important part of health," says Daniel J. Lynch, director of the Holy Name center, FITNESSFirst. But doctors, once they advise patients to get active, have neither the time nor specific strategies to get them started.

People who have joined FITNESSFirst -- 1,500 so far -- "come because we track and monitor their results and deliver outcome reports to their doctor," Lynch says.



CHRIS PEDOTA / THE RECORD

▲ Fitness instructor Leo Martino advises Patti Hill at FITNESSFirst.

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Other North Jersey hospitals are joining this trend.

The Valley Hospital, Englewood Hospital and Medical Center and Hackensack University Medical Center all have plans for their own new free-standing fitness centers. St. Joseph's Wayne Hospital opened one three years ago in Pompton Lakes.

Hospitals hope these gyms will attract new patients and fulfill their mission of promoting health as well as healing the sick.

FITNESSFirst has specific protocols that combine exercise and nutrition for seven disease-management programs: weight control, cancer prevention, heart disease, diabetes, osteoporosis, osteoarthritis and vestibular balance. If a member's doctor prescribes one of those, the cost of the program is tax-deductible under federal law, Lynch says.

'A safer environment'

But others can participate without being involved in a specific program. Membership is priced to be competitive with other health clubs, Lynch says, with a one-time enrollment fee of \$99 and monthly dues of \$73.

Linda Lohsen is a typical member, a community nurse who describes herself as "50-plus, with a little bit of high blood pressure, a little stiffness." She says she's gone to other gyms, "but at this point you feel like you want someone with a medical background watching over you. It's a safer environment."

The first of three introductory visits helped her set her goals, based on a physical assessment that revealed her "biologic age" as opposed to her chronologic age. "It was a little disconcerting that my biologic age was five years older than I am," Lohsen says, "but they were very encouraging."

On the second visit, she received an individual exercise program that combined cardiovascular work with strength training. She also learned how to use the equipment. A third visit will be a nutrition consultation, which will assess the level of antioxidants in her blood and provide suggestions for menu planning.

All of the equipment -- 37 treadmills and dozens of stationary bikes, Arc trainers, Stairmasters and Cybex strength-training machines -- is hooked up to a central computer. Digital readouts tell the user his or her specific settings, count the number of exercise repetitions and record the number of calories expended.

As with most hospital-owned fitness centers, FITNESSFirst also has a physical therapy suite on-site staffed by physical therapists from the hospital. Once a patient's rehabilitation is complete, the thinking goes, the patient will shift seamlessly to the main gym to continue his or her exercise program.

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Dr. Craig Hersh, FITNESSFirst's medical director and a former team physician to the New York Giants, says he frequently sees patients with overlapping conditions, such as high cholesterol, hypertension, heart disease and emphysema.

Although medication is usually prescribed, "the best solution," he says, "is a non-medical solution. Or, certainly, a portion of the solution is non-medical. Yet that is the portion of treatment that is most often overlooked."

A health club may feel foreign and uncomfortable to these patients, he says. "There's a need for a reliable source of medically based exercise information."

Point of entry

The medical fitness center offers that kind of help. It emphasizes quantitative assessments, at the beginning and along the way -- thus overcoming the tendency by most patients "to overstate exercise and understate caloric intake," Hersh says.

A medical advisory board helps fitness instructors and trainers with problems that may be beyond their scope. For example, if a patient with emphysema becomes short of breath very quickly upon exertion, what is the appropriate and safe way to advance his or her cardiac workout?

And the medical fitness center gives its members an easy point of entry to the medical system -- a referral to one of the hospital's orthopedists, for example, if a shoulder is acting up. Community education programs about health issues are also held in its meeting spaces.

"This is a movement that's gaining momentum," says Ron Czajkowski, vice president of the New Jersey Hospital Association. "Over the last 10 years, at least a dozen have opened in New Jersey. More and more hospitals are looking into these as subsidiary, for-profit ventures."

FITNESSFirst is a for-profit subsidiary of Holy Name.

Next up in North Jersey is likely to be Englewood Hospital and Medical Center's "4myheart Center," scheduled to open this spring at a location to be announced. The program is designed by the Berkeley Health Lab and focuses on helping patients reduce their risk of heart disease and stroke.

Participants will begin with advanced blood tests whose results help determine the personal treatment plan, says Michael Pietrowicz, an Englewood Hospital vice president. Besides exercise, the program will include nutrition and stress-reduction counseling and medication compliance review.

The Valley Hospital of Ridgewood already has a health and fitness center on Route 17 south, where patients who have completed their post-stroke or cardiac rehabilitation continue exercising in a program called "AfterCare Fitness." The hospital is in discussions to open a much larger center in early 2008 that would attract the general public, says Maureen Curran Kleinman, a hospital spokeswoman.

And Hackensack University Medical Center -- which in 1992 became one of the first hospitals to offer a fitness center on its campus -- also expects to announce plans for a comprehensive fitness and wellness center within 10 miles of the hospital, in Bergen County, says Robert Garrett, the hospital's executive vice

president and chief operating officer.

Besides traditional fitness and gym programs, the Hackensack gym will include aquatics, physical therapy, cardiac rehabilitation and community education, Garrett says.

These centers "accomplish a lot of things for hospitals," he says. "Number one, it's good community outreach. Secondly, it really strengthens our product line in terms of wellness. As hospitals, our mission is both patient care and wellness."

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The latest in gear

Medical fitness centers are stocked with new technology that allows members to make the most of their exercise. Some of the equipment available at FITNESSFirst:

- You Are the Video Game -- In this high-tech video game known as Trazer, the person exercising is the joystick -- leaping, jumping and moving around in response to commands, all while watching his or her movement on the screen. Trazer monitors reaction time, speed, agility, strength and balance.
- BioScan -- This scanner detects the carotenoid level in the skin, an indicator of the antioxidant level in the blood. The measurement is taken by shining a laser beam through the fleshy part of the hand.
- EnergySmart -- The machine measures a person's metabolic rate at rest and during exercise to determine a person's caloric requirements. A weight-loss program can be developed that exactly calculates caloric intake (diet) and output (exercise).
- Polar BodyAge -- This assessment tool calculates a person's body age as compared to his or her chronologic age. It is based on measurements of heart rate, body fat, height, strength, flexibility, cardiac efficiency, blood pressure and various risk factors.
- FitLinxx -- A computerized system linked to all exercise equipment in the gym. It provides information about an individual exercise program, coaches the user through the workout and tracks progress and caloric expenditure.

-- *Lindy Washburn*

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