

Taking the Secret Out of Fitness

by Adam Milligan, EQUIVITA

Recently I was staying at a vacation property and the complex had just finished adding a fitness area with new Brand Name equipment. As this is a vacation property, the center is not designed to accommodate large numbers of people and had only 6 pieces of resistance machines. What I found most interesting is that of the machines selected, one was for the abdominals and one for back extensions. This, of course, got me thinking about why a company would spend so much of their budget on these two pieces of equipment that are, at best, ineffective and at worst, damaging. Of course, machines can lessen the risk of injury and, perhaps just as important to the facility, reduce the risk of losing equipment. A pair of dumbbells can slip out the door far easier than a 500 pound machine. But, if you have only enough space and money for 6 pieces, what would make you choose these two? Now I realize that the selection probably was based on a recommendation by the salespeople for the equipment company, but the purchase must have been influenced by what the end user would want. So, why would people want these machines?

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Much of our society values the idea of defined abs and the fitness industry has supported this to the extent that things like “core strength” are often focused around those appearance muscles and not those that would be most effective in stabilizing the core. We have been sold the idea that you need strong abs to support the back and then we are taught the ways of strengthening abdominal muscles that have little to do with supporting the back. In fact, the rectus abdominus

(big “washboard” muscle) in the upright vertical position would pull the back into a position where more stress could be placed on the disc. Ironically, this is the exact position that many people are trying to avoid.

The main stabilizing muscle of the abdominal group is actually the least discussed, much less trained. This muscle is called the transverse abdominus and is most easily thought of as a back support belt – in fact most back support belts are designed to take the place of this muscle. Exercising this muscle is fairly easy because it simply pulls the waist in smaller. To be effective, though, you must ensure that you are finding and maintaining a spinal position that you want your spine to be in. This position is called neutral posture and is the position when you have the natural curves of your spine and are contracting only those muscles necessary to hold the position. Given this, the method of developing the transverse involves maintaining a strong contraction and leveraging against it. There are a variety of angles and movements to do this and it can even be achieved on some back extension machines. Unfortunately, this is not what is



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typically done on the machines and people often flex and extend the spine as they use them.

I have certainly been in lots of similar fitness facilities and don't know why this particular one stood out to me as representative of the fitness industry and how it frequently fails the public it tries to serve, but it truly made me think about the education that is necessary. There is a constant stream of information, and misinformation, about health and fitness that is so pervasive that fitness professionals also get fooled. One example of this is the difference between fat-burning and fat-loss (check Equivita.com for specifics on this example and why fat-burning doesn't lead to the most fat loss). The concept of an individual determining what is the right thing for his/her body in this environment seems almost laughable.

Each of us has a unique body, and lifestyle, and determining what is right for you can take some effort. But it is possible. One of our primary goals at EQUIVITA is to create better health-care consumers. We do this through two main methods. The first is specific education you can use. This is the basis of our Fitness Assessment - and one of the reasons it takes about 2 hours to complete, our Massage Therapy and our Transitional Fitness Training. The second method is educating through workshops, classes and articles. We know that critical analysis creates better health care consumers. And more people taking control of their health is better for everyone.

So, the next time you come across information, or a fitness center with just a few pieces, try to evaluate it from a more objective stance. Is it right for you? If you are unsure, please don't hesitate to contact me and I will do my best to help you think through it. After all, analyzing this type of information is where most of the topics for our Fit U discussions originate.

