

Fitness in the Fast Lane

HEALTH Magazine, July/August 2003

By Tracy Teare

A total-body workout in 30 minutes?

Sounds too good to be true, but time-starved women all over America are discovering that they don't need to carve out an hour or more to fit in fitness. The key is circuit training, which alternates strength moves with short bursts of aerobic exercise that keep your heart rate elevated.

Although the concept is far from new, it's enjoying a strong surge in popularity. Witness Curves International, a chain of more than 5,000 fitness centers in the United States and abroad, which owes its explosive growth since 1995 to its signature 30-minute circuit workouts. A growing number of other fitness centers have followed Curves' lead. One franchise, Ladies Workout Express, plans to open 1,000 locations by year's end. "I was stunned to learn that you don't have to spend an hour and a half to get a good workout," says Curves devotee Tereasa Everett, 36, of Kinston, North Carolina. Because it's quick (she goes on her lunch hour with time to spare) and effective (she's lost more than 100 pounds since April 2001), she's stuck with it.

To do the routine, you start on one of the raised foam pads called "recovery stations" and march, hop, do the pony, or whatever it takes to maintain your heart rate. Then a recorded voice cues you to move to the resistance machine next to you. The device, which uses hydraulics instead of weights, adjusts to each individual's fitness level -- the more energy you exert, the more resistance it provides. After a minute, the voice prompts you to go to the next cardio station, and so on. You can get the same effect in a typical health-club, at home, or at a track, just without the automated prods to move you through the workout and the social interaction these intimate women-only settings provide.

"Circuit training is so efficient, that's why busy people love it," says Michael Wood, a certified strength and conditioning specialist and director of Sports Performance Group, a fitness-consulting company in Westwood, Massachusetts. Not only do you get both cardiovascular and strength work in one neat package, but the fast pace and variety motivate you and help you avoid mental and physical plateaus.

Circuits aren't perfect, though. If you're aiming to win a 10K or a bodybuilding contest, you need to focus specifically on either cardio or strength training. If you try to put your own workout together at a gym, traffic in the weight room could slow you down; at home, floor space and access to equipment pose problems. And because circuit training doesn't score big on flexibility, it's wise to include a stretching session at the end of your workout. For fans, these downsides pale compared to the trump cards: variety and quick pace. "You're doing something different every minute or two, and the possibilities are endless," Wood says.