

## Fitness Centers (and Snowstorms) Cause Obesity

There are two kinds of people in this world: Those who go the gym, and those who don't.

I'm in the second group. But it's not for lack of interest. I actually had a fitness center membership once (long, long, ago, in a galaxy far, far away), and I actually did go for awhile. I enjoyed working out, and I felt the positive changes of regular physical activity. But then it snowed.

So, ten years later, I have yet to join another gym. In fact, other than walking through the Physical Therapy gyms in our various clinics, I haven't even seen the inside of a fitness center since 2003. And according to all the research out there, I must not be alone.

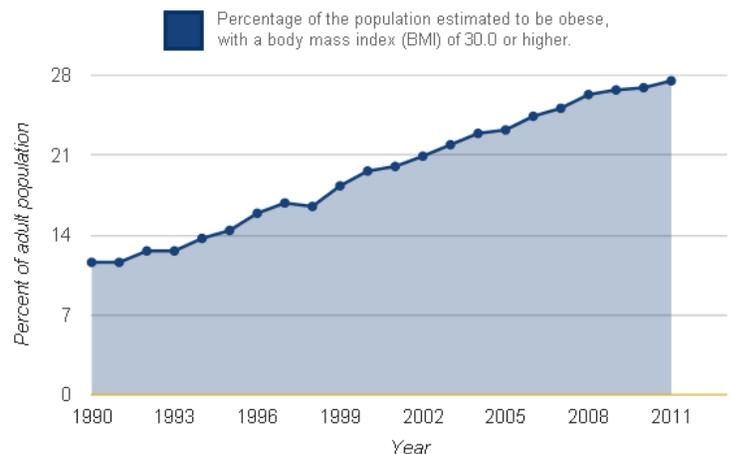
In the 1990s, the number of private, membership-based fitness centers in the United States rose 75%. That's phenomenal growth no doubt influenced by our ever-growing awareness of the need for exercise. **Yet somehow, during the same time period, U.S. obesity rates increased 125%.**

How is it that we have nearly doubled the opportunity to find a fitness center (I can count three within two square miles of my home), yet the number of obese people has more than doubled? What gives?

While the availability of high fat, high calorie, low effort food items (fancy terms for "fast food", etc.) certainly plays a major role in the rise of American obesity, a general lack of activity is also to blame. American jobs are more sedentary than ever before, and the American lifestyle requires less physical labor, less walking, less movement in general than at any other time in history. It's a perfect storm for unhealthy.

Although we made a momentary gain earlier this year when Twinkies were pulled from the shelves, they've made their inevitable return; we can no longer rely on the "reverse-Twinkie-effect" to eliminate our obesity problem. We must help employees increase activity levels.

With that in mind, many companies have begun supplementing their employee wellness programs with some sort of fitness center incentive. According to a recent article in *Club Industry*, two options have risen to the top as the most preferred among employees: 1) On-site fitness centers at your place of work; 2) Free fitness center membership at an off-site facility.



Although these are two very different approaches, one factor is clearly equal: **They are both free to employees.** If your company ever hopes to drive participation and growth in your wellness program, fitness center opportunities must be made available at no expense to employees. Reductions and discounts affect employees just like that first snow affected my desire to hit the gym. It's really all or nothing, so your company should either decide to invest in employee exercise or choose an alternative wellness initiative altogether.

Once you've decided to go for it, the decision becomes a bit more complex. Employees prefer on-site facilities, but just barely over free membership to an off-site facility. This option depends largely on your current work environment, space constraints, budget, and time. Several of our Des Moines area occupational medicine clients offer on-site fitness centers, but the majority of our clients who offer fitness center incentives do so in the way of free (or reduced price) memberships to off-site facilities. Here at UnityPoint Health – Des Moines, we do both. We're lucky enough to have modest on-site fitness facilities for employee use, but with employees working in such a wide range of campus locations and living throughout the metro (and beyond), our benefits group opted to also offer discounted memberships.

With fitness centers available to employees, the next challenge is encouraging participation. This all comes back to culture, especially when on-site facilities are used. Employees must be immersed in a wellness culture that encourages and rewards fitness center use. They must be embedded in supportive groups that hold each other accountable. They must be afforded the time and opportunity to use the fitness center during regular working hours (on breaks, over lunch, before and/or after shifts). They must be recognized for using the facility.

The same mechanisms can be beneficial if your employees are using off-site facilities, but the lack of visibility means you must work that much harder to recognize those employees who are taking advantage of the benefit. Post regular attendees on a wellness board someplace. Offer rewards for weight loss, strength benchmarks, cardio goals, and more. Create a wellness newsletter and name names. Wellness culture cannot exist without leaders, and the employees who develop a habit of regular fitness center use will become champions for the benefit.

If you succeed at driving employee fitness center engagement but history goes unchecked, your increased fitness center membership will mean increased obesity rates. I know, it sounds odd, but please refer to paragraph 4 above if you doubt me. Individual employers making strides to break this trend within their own workplaces will be the push America needs to bring balance back to these two statistics. More fitness centers and more memberships should mean healthier people.

Maybe you should budget a good pair of snowshoes for everyone, just in case.

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*Resources:*

United States: Obesity 2000 – 2012, <http://www.americashealthrankings.org/all/obesity>

“Top Desired Worker Benefits” by Pamela Kurfahl, *Club Industry*, February 5, 2013  
<http://clubindustry.com/studies/>