

THE PLAIN DEALER

DECEMBER 19, 2009

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Cuyahoga County residents to get free three-month gym memberships

By Sarah Jane Tribble
December 19, 2009

If one of your New Year's resolutions is to get fit and eat healthy, it's your lucky day.

Cuyahoga County's adult residents get free gym memberships at YMCA or Curves for the first three months of the New Year, thanks to a new partnership between the Cleveland Clinic, the gyms and other public agencies.

"We hope that this will be one barrier that's removed from the people of Cuyahoga County," said Glenn Haley, chief executive officer and president of the YMCA of Greater Cleveland.

"There's no money involved. All you have to do is show up."



John Kuntz, The Plain Dealer

Cuyahoga County residents could be flocking to the gyms with a free, three-month offer that starts in January. Barb Catalano of Cleveland and other members worked up a sweat at a spinning class Friday night at the YMCA in downtown Cleveland.

Residents who aren't already a member at the YMCA or Curves can go to gofitcleveland.com and sign up for the free membership. They'll be able to work out at the YMCA's nine area locations or Curves' 20 area locations. Participants also get instruction on starting a workout routine and nutritious eating habits as well as some discounts from Dave's Markets.

The Cleveland Clinic, which is spearheading the gofitcleveland.com program, said demand on the Web site was strong after its noon announcement Friday: More than 700 people had signed up within hours.

"This is an opportunity that we at the Cleveland Clinic see for the community to begin the change from sickness care to well care," said Cleveland Clinic Chief Executive and President Dr. Toby Cosgrove during the noon announcement.

Cosgrove, who has been an outspoken national voice on health reform and wellness, said he hopes the program will begin to tackle the region's rising obesity epidemic.

More than 50 percent of Ohio's adults are predicted to be obese by 2018 -- making the state one of the fattest in the nation, according to a research released by Kenneth E. Thorpe of Emory University last month.

Cosgrove has said frequently, and repeated it Friday, that 10 percent of

America's health care costs are driven by obesity.

Getting fit

- *Go to gofitcleveland.com for to learn more and to sign up.*

- *Free memberships are only available for Cuyahoga County residents. The memberships will be at YMCA's nine area locations and at Curves' 20 locations.*

- *Participants must complete weekly check-ins to track progress and stay in the program.*

- *The program is not for existing Curves or YMCA members and those who have bought memberships in the past 90 days at either organization cannot qualify.*

Source: Cleveland Clinic, Curves and YMCA

The only catch? You have to complete a weekly check-in to track progress and stay in the program. Those with the greatest total weight loss, number of workouts and overall change in fitness will be recognized.

"We're never going to get the costs of health care under control unless we control the epidemic of obesity," Cosgrove said.

The Clinic declined to say how much money it was spending on the program, but one spokeswoman said that each of the partners was contributing "in-kind" and administrative costs. She added that it was difficult to say how much it might cost because it is unknown how many people will sign up.

The joint fitness campaign takes a page from the Clinic's successful play book on battling smoking rates in Cuyahoga County, said Matt Carroll, director of public health for the city of Cleveland. The Clinic's 2007 three-month campaign with the city and county was so successful that it was extended by several months.

Thousands of free nicotine patches were given out and thousands more people used a smoking cessation hotline, Carroll said. Cuyahoga County's smoking rates dropped from 28 percent to 18 percent during the past four years, according to Cosgrove.



John Kuntz, The Plain Dealer

Jimmy Williams of Cleveland gave the free weights a workout Friday evening at the YMCA on Prospect Avenue in Cleveland.

The start of a new year is generally when American's resolve to improve their health and fitness clubs see a spike in membership, said Kara Thompson, spokeswoman for the International Health, Racquet & Sportsclub Association, the fitness industry's trade association.

"January is a really critical time of the year for people to really jumpstart healthy living, especially after all the feasting and merriment of the holiday season -- people are really prepared to start fresh," Thompson said.

Many gyms offer start-up incentives and free two-week sessions to help people begin a workout routine, and indeed many long-time gym goers will skip

workouts at the first of the year to avoid the rush.

The YMCA's Haley said it has hired extra staff and has scheduled extra classes to be prepared for an influx of program participants. Curves, which is largely focused on women but also offers weight management classes for men, said it has also prepared its staff.

Participants who want to continue working out after the end of three months may qualify for scholarships at the YMCA, Haley said. A spokeswoman for Curves said it was not offering additional discounts. Memberships there are about \$40 a month.

The city and county also offer free fitness programs, such as those available at the city's recreation centers. Carroll said that he hoped the program will also raise interest in the city's recreation centers with educational programs for residents.

"Even if you get a three-month membership without any hope of continuing on your own financially, you've gotten yourself to the spring

maybe you'll use other resources available," Carroll said, then he added "I'm really curious to see how many people do it."