

# Big Promises Little Results

By Richard J. Wolff, RD, LDN

At a time when few Americans are choosing to be physically active, the fitness industry seems to be booming. In fact, it's easy to find a fitness center on nearly every corner these days. While adding fitness centers to a community can be good, the use of unsubstantiated claims to promote them is not. Consumers are already confused when it comes to fitness information. The last thing they need is to be misled about the benefits of an exercise program.

An example of this injustice comes from a local women's fitness center promoting a "30-Minute, 650-Calorie-Burning Workout." Burning 650 calories in 30 minutes would require the average 150 lb. woman to run at a pace that would break the world record in the marathon. Given that this fitness center serves average women (not world class athletes), I found the claim to be very misleading.

To help clarify things, I decided to call the fitness center and ask about the calorie-burning claim. The woman I spoke to indicated that it was a 650-calorie workout. Unfortunately, she offered no explanation for how they came up with the 650-calorie claim. While this may seem like an insignificant discrepancy to some, it could be life-altering to others. Research has shown that many people adopt an exercise program based on the advice of their physician. Two of the most common reasons for recommending exercise are weight loss and the management of a chronic disease (such as diabetes or heart disease).

Current exercise guidelines issued by the U.S. Surgeon General and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommend that adults burn at least 1000 calories per week. A member of this fitness center would mistakenly believe they were meeting federal exercise guidelines by completing two, 30-minute workouts.

In reality two, 30-minute workouts at this facility would burn closer to 350 calories (approximately 70% less than they claim). This is important because most people quit their exercise program when they don't achieve expected results. By overstating the calories burned, the instructors at this facility are actually setting their clients up for failure.

This unfortunate trend (misleading advertising) exists in the fitness industry as a whole. Before you decide to join any fitness center, the Federal Trade Commission recommends that you ask for the credentials and experience of the staff who will be supervising your workouts. When it comes to fitness, if something sounds too good to be true, it probably is.

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