

Analysis of the “Curves” Fitness Program

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Many people have asked me what my thoughts were on the Curves fitness program. After researching the program, interviewing current and past members, and speaking with other fitness professionals around the country I have compiled the following analysis.

WHAT IS “CURVES”?

Curves is a franchised exercise program designed exclusively for women. The Curves program has spread across the nation like wildfire due to claims such as: “No experience necessary, only 30 minutes for a full-body workout, no class times, no appointments to keep, you can’t be late for your workout because the circuit is always on!” In fact, the Curves franchise is listed by Entrepreneur Magazine as one of the top franchises to own. The question is why has it grown so popular?

The answer can be found in the target audience of the Curves program. Curves caters to a very large group of women seeking positive physical change in a supportive environment. Most commercial gyms and fitness centers do not come close to offering a friendly and supportive environment for beginning exercisers be it female or male. You have to give credit where credit is due. The originator of this franchise recognized that there was a huge market for a gym such as Curves and surely has tapped into a goldmine.

GREAT CONCEPT, BUT WHAT ABOUT THE ACTUAL PROGRAM?

Curves is definitely great from a marketing and business perspective but what about the actual exercise program that is followed? One of the Curves members that I interviewed offered the following synopsis:

“They have about 10 different units. Leg extensions/leg curls, squats, leg press, glut press, biceps curls/triceps extensions, lat pull downs/overhead press, chest press/seated row, a dip/shrug machine, and a seated abdominal machine. They repeat some of the machines and you go around the circuit 1 and 1/2 times. In between each machine there is 3’ x 3’ platform that you perform some continuous exercise such as running in place or stationary jumping. The goal is to stay in the fat burning target heart rate zone for 30 minutes.”

Curves is a 30-minute exercise circuit comprised of hydraulic resistance machines and bodyweight exercises. The nature of the hydraulic machines used in the Curves program forces the user to perform concentric (muscle shortening) contractions of the opposing muscle groups. No eccentric (muscle lengthening) muscle action occurs when using these machines so very little muscle soreness is developed. The problem with the lack of the eccentric muscle actions is that it does not put a lot of stress on the muscle and a muscle not stressed is a muscle that will not change.

In fact, as Strength Coach Christian Thibeadeau points out in his book *Theory and Application of Modern Strength and Power Methods*,

“It was found that omitting eccentric stress in training program severely compromised the potential strength gains (Dudley et al. 1991). “

Curves members are encouraged to check their heart rates every 8 minutes to ensure that they are in their target heart rate zones. In summary, the Curves routine is a circuit-training program that focuses on muscular endurance and aerobic exercise.

A GOOD START BUT.....

It is important to point out that every exercise program has benefits and inherent weaknesses. I commend the originator of the Curves program for the benefit that it introduces women who would not otherwise be exercising to a regular exercise routine. There are, however, many limitations to the exercise routine utilized by Curves.

Some of those limitations are lack of an individualized exercise routine (cookie-cutter approach), absence of a comprehensive fitness assessment, reliance on limited-value hydraulic exercise equipment, lack of progressive overload (for both resistance training routine and cardiovascular conditioning), lack of exercise variety which can lead to overuse injuries, lack of program design that is based on current research to deliver optimal results, lack of instruction on how exercisers should progress after reaching a plateau with the program, and finally a lack of qualified supervision by an exercise specialist which poses many problems in itself. The lack of qualified supervision can lead to problems such as not knowing when to refer out to the appropriate medical professional if problems arise, recognizing when an individual is over-training, or modifying an exercise routine to suit the individual's current needs and training level.

Simply put, the Curves fitness program utilizes outdated exercise programming that predisposes the exerciser to an abundance of overuse injuries (bursitis, tendonitis, medial and lateral epicondylitis, etc.) and does not deliver optimal results in the safest manner possible. I work full-time at a Physical Therapy clinic and we have seen countless cases of women developing overuse injuries from the Curves program. It should be a big red flag but some people just are not making the connection that the nature of the program is what causes the problems. I hate to say it and I hope that you are not offended, but the Curves program is fairly limited.

Any competent fitness professional could design an individualized exercise program combining progressive resistance training, anaerobic intervals (when appropriate), aerobic exercise (for recovery purposes), flexibility training, and restoration/recovery methods that would deliver results that are far superior to the results delivered by following the Curves fitness program. An individualized exercise program that suits your specific exercise and health history, caters to your specific fitness goals (athletic or aesthetic), focuses on metabolism-boosting resistance training methods, and focuses on progressively overloading the system in an intelligent manner with a variety of different loading parameters and exercises will far surpass any “one-size fits all” exercise program as found in all Curves centers.

Any current Curves members would be wise to pay attention to nagging pains that are developing (any joint pain or soft-tissue pain that does not diminish in 48 hours). They should also pay attention to any plateaus that are reached in their weight loss or fitness results.

The human body is an amazing adapting machine and eventually the body will adapt to the stresses (exercise is a stress after all) that you are asking it to perform. If your body has adapted to a specific exercise routine and you continue to subject your body to that routine, you not only run the risk of developing overuse injuries but your fat-loss results will come to a screeching halt and you will see no further improvements by following that same program. Here-in lies the major weakness of the Curves program, it does not change!

There is a concept in exercise physiology known as Progressive Overload. Basically, it means that over time, you have to gradually and intelligently lift more weight, perform more repetitions, or change something about your workouts in a progressive manner in order to see results. Once your body has adapted to a given form of stress, it basically says, "Yeah. We have done this before quite a bit. This stress is nothing new and we don't have to do anything differently and we don't have to change."

If you want to see your body change (i.e. lose fat, get lean) then you must expose your body to varying and progressive stress. I can't stress this concept enough and any program that does not obey this law is doomed to fail! It has been said that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result.

Understand that Curves is a great program for an absolute beginner but it is a vehicle that can only bring you so far!

WHAT DO I DO IF I AM A CURRENT CURVES MEMBER?

Curves has tapped into a huge market of women exercisers that find comfort in being surrounded by other people that are in the same situation as they are. In that regard, Curves is important because it gets more people active and involved with a structured exercise routine. The program that is followed is hardly ideal and is deficient in many aspects. I doubt that the franchise will alter the parameters of the exercise routine any time soon so the current Curves member might take some of the following advice into consideration.

1. Watch out for overuse injuries that might develop and seek the appropriate medical assistance if problems do arise.
2. Pay attention to your body and keep tabs upon your progress. It is always a good idea to check your body fat percentage, body weight, strength levels, girth measurements, energy levels, and track your progress. When your body has adapted to the routine provided by Curves, recognize when it is time to move on. Remember that it is a vehicle that will only take you so far. Once you have adapted to the program you will simply be spinning your wheels!

3. It has been said that insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result. Curves is simply a gateway program. After its full value has been maximized, a member would be wise to seek the advice of a qualified fitness professional to determine an individualized plan of action that would lead to further results.
4. If this plan of action does not sound appealing, then the budding exerciser should begin a journey into the science and practice of shaping their body with the tools of progressive resistance training, cardiovascular exercise, and supportive nutritional practices. The resources are out there such as e-mail list serves like "Supertraining," fitness books, fellow gym members (although not always the most accurate of sources), and fitness magazines.
5. The key is to find progress and escape the restrictions of the simplistic circuit training routine found in Curves. It can be an enjoyable process if approached in the appropriate manner. Have fun, keep progressing, and enjoy the adventure to discovering your best body!

I would be happy to assist you in any way that I can!
Sincerely,

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