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Certification is a light lift for trainers

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You're really going to do it this time.

You're going to get in shape.

You join the gym. You hire a trainer. You start a regimented workout.

But what about that guy who's telling you to give him five more push-ups when your arms feel like Jell-O?

He might not really know what he's doing.

A personal fitness trainer - unlike a hair stylist, nail technician or landscape architect - doesn't need a license to practice in New York. There are no standards for certification programs in the industry. And whatever certifications are out there can be a confusing alphabet soup of organizations.

In fact, any Joe or Jane off the street can be a personal trainer. All they need to do is announce it, advertise it, then charge you hundreds of dollars for their services.

Something like this: "Become a personal fitness trainer and get in shape while going to school" is the come-on in one ad that promises job placement assistance after six months in the "state-approved" program. The ad offers this too: "Every time a student screams, an instructor gets his wings."

"There's no requirement," said Chad Tyrrell, owner and manager of Ignite Fitness, a gym in New Paltz. "There's no legal restriction at all, which is really disappointing."

And dangerous.

All it takes to get hurt is for a so-called "professional" to push you to bench more weight than you can handle, or to suggest a supplement that might interact poorly with a prescription.

In an extreme 1999 case, a New York City woman suffered a fatal stroke after taking a nutritional supplement, strongly recommended by her personal trainer. The supplement contained Ephedra, a natural stimulant. The woman suffered from hypertension and took medication that interacted with the Ephedra, according to published reports.

Should the trainer have known?

"It's the same as evaluating a physician or a lawyer or an accountant," said Mike Niederpruem, director of certification with the American College of Sports Medicine.

At least with those professions, certifications and degrees are regulated and awarded based on a universally accepted curriculum. That's not the case with fitness training. Training certification programs are as varied as trainers themselves, ranging from highly reputable and nationally recognized to downright deplorable.

"There's any number of on-line certifications, but it's like taking an open-book test," said Tyrrell, who's been certified as a trainer, both personal and for sports medicine, for a decade.

It's not just on-line sites that make a nice chunk of change - upwards of \$400 - trainers do too, charging anywhere from \$20 to \$100 per hour. Since you're spending all that hard-earned cash, experts recommend pushing for a complimentary, introductory session, which a certified, reputable trainer should grant. If he or she doesn't, that's the first red flag.

Sajeev Babu, a native of India and a computer science graduate student at SUNY New Paltz, just signed on with a personal trainer for the first time. He was surprised to learn that New York doesn't require a trainer to be licensed and that anyone can deem himself a fitness expert.

Fortunately, Babu lucked out on his maiden workout with Keith Kenney, SUNY New Paltz strength and conditioning coach and certified personal trainer.

"He told me everything about him, how long he'd been doing this, before I chose him," Babu said.

But that's not always the case.

"In almost 10 years of training, I have never had a prospect overly examine my credentials. In fact, it is extremely rare that I even get asked if I am certified," Tyrrell said.

Tyrrell, who majored in pre-med biology in college, said he was "vaguely disappointed" the first time he took a certification test 10 years ago from the American Council on Exercise. He thought it should have been tougher. He's now certified with the National Strength and Conditioning Association, one of only five programs recognized by the National Commission for Certifying Agencies. The group puts the equivalent of a Good Housekeeping Seal on organizations and their licenses and certifications, ranging from podiatry to nursing to music therapy.

Kenney said his certification program wasn't easy. He had to know anatomy, biology and kinesiology, the study of muscle health. He's certified through the American College of Sports Medicine and predominately works with SUNY athletes, but does train faculty, staff and students, too.

In 2004, there were roughly 205,000 people working in the fitness industry. About 7 percent of those were self-employed, most as personal trainers. And within the next 10 years, the industry is predicted to grow by 27 percent or more, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

That's good news for the industry and for consumers, Niederpruem says. Faced with such encouraging numbers, industry leaders are actively pursuing stricter guidelines, tougher certification requirements and even developing training-specific curriculums for colleges and universities.

The Committee on Accreditation for the Exercise Sciences, established in 2004, is dedicated to establishing standards and guidelines for academic programs in the area of health and fitness.

The committee is one of the organizations working toward creating a fitness discipline and curriculum.

Niederpruem surmises that such programs will be in place in the next five to 10 years to meet the needs of a growing industry.

Until then, though, fitness fans beware.

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