

How to Avoid Awkward Situations at the Gym

By Emily G. W. Chau 

Don't make enemies at the health club. Follow these 10 rules of sweatiquette to avoid common fitness offenses

Dear Sweaty McSweaterson:

*Please wipe off the treadmill when you're done.
Love, Your Fellow Gym Members*

You don't have to be an expert on etiquette to know that you shouldn't hog the exercise machines or waltz in 15 minutes late to Spin class. Still, some of us could brush up on Gym Manners 101. "The gym is interesting because people are in their own zone, yet they're all interacting with each other," says Anna Post, a spokesperson for the Emily Post Institute. "It's like an unspoken dance. We have to know how to interact with others, but keep to ourselves."

Don't Yap on Your Cell Phone

Nobody wants to be trapped on the elliptical overhearing your breakup sob story or what you have to pick up from the market, so store your phone in the locker room—or at least put the ringer on silent. "I hate it when people talk while on the treadmill or a phone rings in the middle of **yoga**," says Amy Chernenkoff of Wilmington, DE. "I once saw a woman texting in the middle of Pilates (which we do with the lights dimmed), so she was practically glowing in the dark!"

The Golden Rule: If you must take a call, step outside of the fitness room, advises Post. People have dedicated their time to going to the gym, and it's really disrespectful to bring in a disruption—even a potential one. "You can pick up your phone if say, you're waiting for your wife to go into labor, but in that case, maybe you shouldn't be at the gym in the first place," she says.

Your cell phone won't boost your workout.

Don't Hog the Machines

It's sort of a no-brainer, but don't monopolize the machines or free weights. "I can't stand weight hogs—people who think they own the free weights and won't let anyone else in that area of the gym!" says Patrick Harrison of Excel, AL.

The Golden Rule: In the end, everything goes back to what we learned in kindergarten: Share and play nice. This isn't your private gym, so don't sit in a machine to rest between sets. "As soon as you're done with a set, let someone jump on. It's not a chair," says Michael Bronco, a personal trainer and owner of **Bronco's Gym** in Madison, NJ. "If someone asks to switch off on sets, the answer is always yes," says Post. "The only possible exception is if it's your last set."

Don't Leave Your Weights Around

The gym staff isn't here to pick up after you, so help everyone out and rerack your weights after you finish your set. "I get annoyed with people who can't organize the same weight plates together. Don't put the 25-pound plate in front of the 45s. I bet they were the kids trying to put a round peg into a square hole," says Josh Linscott of Portland, ME.

The Golden Rule: Put the free weights back where you found them, and keep them ordered. "The only time it's OK not to put back your weights is if you're leaving light weights on a machine," says Danielle Hopkins, a group fitness manager at Equinox in New York City. It's fine to keep 25-pound weights on a leg press all the time, but if you're loading up with four 45-pound weights, take them off and put them back.

Don't Block the Weight Rack

It's hard enough to get people to re-rack their weights, so don't make it even more difficult for them by single-handedly forcing a detour.

The Golden Rule: If your workout requires a ton of space, hit the gym during off-peak hours or use the group fitness studio between classes. If you can make it only during prime time, be considerate. Instead of doing **traveling lunges**, try regular ones, suggests Hopkins.

Don't Leave a Puddle of Sweat

Okay, some of us can't help it if we sweat a lot, but that doesn't give you license to leave a machine a hot, wet mess for the next person. "I hate it when people don't wipe down the machines," says Trever Thomas of Columbus, OH. "They just use it, get up, walk away, go on to the next machine, and then do the same thing. So gross and unsanitary!" While sweat in and of itself doesn't have any germs, bacteria grows fairly quickly in it after it hits your skin.

The Golden Rule: "It's common courtesy to clean off your sweat," says Bronco. "Would you walk into someone's house with mud all over your shoes?" More often than not, it's easier to wipe down a machine yourself if someone leaves it wet, but if it's an ongoing problem with one person, you might want to get management involved.

Don't Be the Gym Exhibitionist

Many gyms have dress codes for a reason. You're not picking up ladies at the gym, so keep your shirt on. Underwear is best left under your clothes, and short shorts on guys are as distracting as they are on women. "It makes you uncomfortable when scantily dressed **couples help each other 'stretch'** inappropriately, for everyone to see!" says Nicole Papantoniou of Whitestone, NY. The locker-room nudist is even worse—need we say more?

The Golden Rule: Use good judgment. You want to dress appropriately for what you're doing. Basketball shorts are fine for running, but not so much when you're doing inversions in yoga. If you want to train barefoot, that's OK—just check with management first. And the locker room was made for changing clothes and showering—not for sauntering around naked.

Don't Come Late to Class

You wouldn't come late to school without getting a tardy slip, so don't think you can saunter into a group fitness class without getting the evil eye at the very least.

The Golden Rule: According to Post, you shouldn't even try to join the class if you're more than a minute late. Not everyone is such a stickler—Equinox has a 10-minute grace period—but you ought to make it a priority to arrive on time, especially if you're trying a class for the first time. "If you're new to class, you need to get there early anyway, tell the instructor, and get help setting up," says Hopkins. "You're cheating yourself out of valuable warm-up time by not being on time."

Don't Drop Your Weights

Between the zip of the treadmill and the occasional grunt, the gym is not a center of Zen-like quiet, nor should it be. Still, dropping weights all the time doesn't count as mere background noise. It's not macho either. "Guys who drop their weights from 2 to 3 feet off the ground scare the heck out of me," says Louise Sloan of Brooklyn, NY. "I have occasionally said, with wide fake-concerned eyes, something to the effect of, 'Wow, are you OK? Maybe you should try a little lighter weight if you can't hold it.'"

The Golden Rule: Dropping your weights to the floor or letting the weights bang on machines is frowned upon and may be a sign that you're not doing the exercise properly, according to Hopkins. For Bronco, dropping weights is probably inappropriate in most health clubs, but OK if you're an Olympic power lifter. However, if you need to lift that kind of weight, look for a gym that specializes in power lifting and has a power rack station.