

rmp

Risk control Supervised and Unsupervised Gyms



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Supervised and Unsupervised Gyms

Introduction

Gyms play a vital role in promoting both physical and mental well-being for individuals¹.

Organisations are increasingly under financial pressure due to reduced funding and increasing cost inflation.

This has led to the rise of unsupervised gyms across the UK. These facilities offer members low-cost fitness opportunities which they can access up to 24 hours a day. This business model is quite different to that of a traditional gym which usually maintains significant staffing levels during all hours of opening.

Gym operators have specific legal responsibilities that are set out under various Acts and Regulations to ensure the safe and efficient operation of these facilities. This guidance note will explore some of the most reported accident causes, and the legal requirements that organisations must consider when operating gyms.

Health and Safety Regulations

The health and safety of gym members is of paramount importance. The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999² requires employers to make a suitable and sufficient assessment of the health and safety risks. Depending on the activities, classes, and the people partaking in the activities, the level of detail and complexity of a risk assessment will vary. By conducting a risk assessment, it will allow the organisation to ensure that they can provide a suitable and safe environment for both the staff and members using the facilities.

There are a number of other regulations that organisations who provide gym facilities should be aware of and should adhere to including the Occupiers Liability Act 1957³ and 1984⁴.

Common Accident Factors

Falling Objects

Gyms usually maintain an abundance of equipment, most of which is heavy by design. When incorrectly stacked or stored equipment and weights can fall. Weights (bar plates) can be racked incorrectly on Squat or Smith machines and fall off when in use or when people walk past, causing injury's ranging from bumps and bruises to fractures.

Equipment Failure

Gym equipment, like all equipment, needs frequent inspection and maintenance. Cables, belts, and pulleys do wear and should be inspected regularly for signs of damage. If defects are found, the equipment should be taken out of use immediately and repaired by a competent person. A

cable / belt snapping, or pulley failure when under load can potentially result in significant injuries.

Contact with Sharp Edges

Gym equipment design and ergonomics have improved massively over the years. Many of the old steel box framework designs have been replaced with smooth plastic-coated surfaces which has reduced the number of manufactured sharp edges. However, from time to time, equipment wears or can become damaged.

Regular inspections allied to consideration to the placement of equipment can reduce the risk of damage through accidental contact with free weights or other equipment.

Slips and Trips

Members can perspire during physical exercise. To remain hydrated, they may carry water bottles around the gyms.

Occasionally liquids do spill, and floors / equipment can become contaminated. Depending on the type of flooring, equipment design, location of the spill or contamination, and lighting levels, spillages can sometimes be difficult to see which can result in people slipping.

Slipping when carrying weights can result in significant injuries and therefore protocols should be in place to ensure any spillages are cleaned up as soon as possible to reduce the risk of an accident.

In most gyms the number and diversity of equipment is a key consideration when people are deciding if they are going to become a member. Cardio and resistance machines are large and bulky objects which occupy significant floor space. This means that gyms can feel quite cramped and cluttered. It is therefore important to design gyms with safe access and egress in mind for both the abled and disabled members.

Consideration should be given to the flow of members around the gym. The positioning of equipment can create areas which logically work together and produce a natural flow for the members as they go through a workout program.

It is important to keep walkways free of clutter. Providing labelled suitable storage facilities for free weights and other handheld equipment close to the areas of intended use will reduce the risk of equipment being discarded in walkways or around high footfall areas.

Strains and Sprains

Customers using the gym can occasionally experience strains and sprains by not warming up correctly, incorrect techniques, or by trying to lift too much weight. The best way for members to avoid strains and sprains is to follow a bespoke progressive workout program, designed by a

competent person who has knowledge of the individual's goals, their capability, and any medical history that is relevant. The current trend for unsupervised gyms and optional inductions increases the risk of injury to the members. Please see 'Unsupervised Gyms' below.

Inappropriate Use of Equipment

One of the benefits of having supervised gyms is that the organisation can ensure that they can provide suitable instruction and guidance to members and ensure that the equipment is being used correctly. Members found to be misusing equipment can be quickly identified and provided with guidance by staff on its correct and safe use.

The provision of information to members is dependent on the level of competency of the staff. Organisations can require different standards, qualifications, and certification depending on the level of responsibility of the staff members and the complexities of the equipment and activities within the gym. Organisations must ensure that fitness professionals possess the necessary skills and knowledge to provide safe and effective services. For example, personal trainers may be required to hold recognised fitness certifications.

Organisations may also mandate ongoing training and professional development for gym staff to stay up to date with industry best practices. Compliance with these requirements is essential to ensure the well-being of the members.

Young People

Young people (from 11-15 years old) are often encouraged to use gyms. Some gyms offer specific low-rate concessions to encourage healthy living habits in young people. Due to their age, additional supervision and staff presence should be considered to ensure the safety of the young members and the safe use of equipment.

Inductions and Medical Declarations

It is good practice to require all members to undergo an induction when joining a gym with a qualified member of staff. The induction process should provide the new member with guidance on how to safely use the facility and equipment, as well as any other arrangements such as emergency protocols, incident reporting etc. These inductions should be documented and stored for a minimum of 3 years.

Qualified gym staff can, if required, produce bespoke fitness programmes for the members. These programs should take into consideration information provided on medical declarations such as underlying medical conditions, injuries, or previous surgeries as well as the member's age and the individual's goals. By maintaining a staff presence in the

gym and providing members with instruction on the safe use of equipment, and guidance on safe techniques, injuries may be prevented.

Noise and Nuisance Control

Gyms can generate noise and disturbances that may impact neighbouring properties. Organisations may have to investigate noise complaints generated by music or the amplified voice of instructors running classes. Noise levels should be monitored and adjusted accordingly if complaints are received to minimise disturbances in the immediate area.

First Aid and Emergency Procedures

Maintaining adequate provisions for first aid in gyms is an obvious consideration due to the nature of exercise and physical excursion. The levels of first aid provisions should be identified through an assessment of needs as stipulated within the First Aid Regulations 1981⁵.

Whilst the 1981 Regulations do not place a legal duty on employers to make first-aid provision for non-employees, it is strongly recommended that non-employees are included in an assessment of first aid needs and that provision is made for them.

The organisation should have suitable emergency protocols in place which cover areas such as fire, security, and medical incidents. Suitable arrangements and protocols should be drawn up and training provided to staff.

In unsupervised gyms, consideration must be given to how members will be able to summon help in an emergency.

Unsupervised Gyms

Unsupervised gyms pose several risks that need to be considered:

- **Safety Risks:** Without supervision, the risk of accidents and injuries increases. Members may not use equipment correctly, leading to strains, sprains, or more severe injuries. In the event of an emergency, such as a heart attack or severe injury, immediate assistance may not be available
- **Liability Issues:** Gym owners may face increased liability risks if an accident occurs and there is no staff present to assist or intervene. This can lead to potential legal claims and increased insurance costs
- **Security Concerns:** Unsupervised gyms may be more vulnerable to theft or vandalism. Without staff to monitor the premises, there is a higher risk of equipment being stolen or damaged
- **Hygiene and Maintenance:** Without regular supervision, cleanliness and maintenance of the gym equipment and

facilities may suffer. This can lead to unhygienic conditions and equipment malfunctions, which can further increase the risk of injury

- **Inappropriate Behaviour:** The absence of staff can lead to inappropriate behaviour among members, such as harassment or misuse of facilities, which can create an uncomfortable or unsafe environment for other members
- **Lack of Guidance:** Members may not have access to professional guidance or support, which can hinder their fitness progress and increase the risk of injury due to improper exercise techniques

Managing unsupervised gyms effectively requires a strategic approach to ensure safety, security, and a positive member experience. This would include:

- **Access Control:** Implement a secure access system, such as key cards, PIN codes, or biometric scanners, to ensure that only authorised members can enter the gym. This helps maintain security and track who is using the facility
- **Surveillance Systems:** Install high-quality surveillance cameras throughout the gym to monitor activities and deter theft or vandalism. Ensure that cameras cover all areas, including entrances, exits, and workout zones
- **Emergency Protocols:** Provide clear instructions for emergency situations. Install emergency buttons or phones that connect directly to local emergency services. Ensure that first aid kits and automated external defibrillators AEDs are easily accessible
- **Signage and Instructions:** Place clear signage throughout the gym with instructions on how to use equipment safely, gym rules, and emergency procedures. This can help guide members and reduce the risk of accidents
- **Regular Maintenance and Cleaning:** Schedule regular maintenance checks and cleaning to ensure that equipment is in good working condition and the facility is hygienic. This can prevent equipment malfunctions and maintain a pleasant environment
- **Virtual Support and Training:** Offer virtual training sessions or access to fitness apps that provide workout guidance and support. This can help members exercise safely and effectively without in-person supervision
- **Member Education:** Educate members on gym etiquette, safety practices, and how to use equipment properly. This can be done through orientation sessions, informational videos, or printed materials
- **Feedback Mechanism:** Provide a way for members to report issues or provide feedback, such as a suggestion box or a digital platform. This can help identify and address problems quickly

- **Insurance and Liability:** Ensure that the insurer is notified of the presence of the gym facility. Clearly communicate the terms and conditions of gym use to members, including any waivers or disclaimers.

By implementing these strategies, gym owners can effectively manage unsupervised gyms, ensuring a safe and secure environment for all members.

Key Points

- Risk assessments should cover hazards such as fire, security threats, physical risk of injuries, and medical emergencies
- Falling objects. Gyms should have clearly marked areas for storing weights and gym equipment - Staff should patrol areas to ensure that weights and equipment are stored correctly
- Gym equipment should be visually inspected regularly by staff for defects such as visual fraying of belts, cracks to pulleys and welds as well as damage which can result in sharp edges. Any equipment found to be defective should be taken out of use immediately and repaired or replaced as soon as practicable. Formal inspections and maintenance of gym equipment should be conducted in accordance with the manufacture's instructions. Inspection and maintenance records should be held for a minimum of 3 years
- Spillages and floor contamination should be cleared up as soon as possible to minimise the risk of reoccurrence and injury to members. Walkways and high footfall areas should be kept clear of gym equipment
- All members should be given instruction on the safe use of equipment during a gym induction. Medical declarations should be reviewed annually, and if necessary, authoritative medical advice sought from the member
- It is good practice to maintain staffing levels in gyms to ensure that members are kept safe, and any issues can be quickly addressed.
- It is advisable to increase basic staffing levels when younger persons are using the gym. This increased presence will ensure the correct use of equipment and minimise the risk of injuries
- Unsupervised gyms potentially increase the risk of injury or adverse incident to members. Therefore, these enhanced risks should be considered as part of the dedicated risk assessment process

Conclusion

Organisations in the UK have significant legal responsibilities when it comes to managing gyms. These responsibilities include providing a safe environment for visitors, ensuring staff have suitable qualifications and training, and emergency preparedness. Compliance with these legal requirements is essential for the smooth and safe operation of these facilities.

References

1. [Three-quarters of gym-goers report boost in mental health, report says | Health | The Guardian](#)
2. [The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](#)
3. [Occupiers' Liability Act 1957 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](#)
4. [Occupiers' Liability Act 1984 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](#)
5. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukSI/1981/917/made>

Further information

For access to further RMP Resources you may find helpful in reducing your organisation's cost of risk, please access the RMP Resources or RMP Articles pages on our website. To join the debate follow us on our LinkedIn page.

Get in touch

For more information, please contact your broker, RMP risk control consultant or account director.

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