

Outdoor gyms fight fat in South Africa

April 5 2012, by Sibongile Khumalo

Sweat drips down the face of a plump woman as she shuffles between exercise machines and pauses to greet passersby in Soweto's first outdoor gym, a new trend in South Africa, one of the world's fattest nations.

The facility, set in a park among tiny two-bedroom homes, has caught on with many Sowetans who are determined to lose the flab without signing expensive gym contracts.

Opened by the Johannesburg city council a month ago, the gym has seen the people of all ages pumping iron and swaying around in swing-like contraptions designed to target problem fat.

"Joining a gym has never ever crossed my mind. But this place has made things much easier for me because it is close to my house and free," said 37-year-old Chichi Mofokeng.

"I can simply walk here anytime. Doctors have repeatedly told me to lose weight and get healthy, so this is my chance," said the enthusiastic mother of two who weighs 90 kilograms (200 pounds).

Unlike Brazil, Britain, the United States and some other countries, outdoor gyms in South Africa are not common, despite the pressing need to tackle the increasing [obesity rates](#).

Last year the city of Cape Town unveiled its first outdoor gym on the beach front, catering for residents of affluent suburbs along the Atlantic

seaboard. The city is considering to open more free gyms in other areas to promote physical wellness.

In some studies, South Africa could soon overtake the United States as the world's fattest nation. In 2007, the Medical Research Council found that 56 percent of [adult women](#) and 29 percent of [adult men](#) in South Africa were overweight or obese.

-- 'Our aim is to get people moving' --

Another study by a pharmaceutical company in 2010 revealed that 61 percent of the country's 50 million people were obese, trailing only the [United States](#) and Britain.

[Health authorities](#) blame the easy access to unhealthy fast foods, with an assortment of outlets available in almost all public places, as well as a decline in overall [fitness levels](#).

Tim Hogin, managing director of Green Outdoor Gyms, the company that provided the eco-friendly gym equipment, said he decided to get involved after reading about the staggering obesity statistics in the country.

"I was shocked by the figures. Our aim is to get people moving, fit and healthy," said Hogin.

"I realised that not everyone could afford paying for a gym membership and that was the biggest excuse for not exercising," he added.

Hogin said his company plans to roll out 1,000 more gyms across the country in two years.

The immovable machines are designed to withstand the outdoor weather

conditions and minor wear and tear.

Grouped together in the middle of the park, the machines could easily be mistaken for playground equipment, until they are seized by the ample-sized patrons.

"As you can see I am a bit big, so I want to get slim and healthy and encourage my children to get active. Working out is no longer reserved for the well-off, even people like us can now get fit," said Chewa Letsoale.

Soweto which has a 1.7 million population had no gymnasiums until Virgin Active, the chain owned by British mogul Richard Branson, opened its doors there last December.

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