

# Smaller classes, online reservations new norm as gyms reopen

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Mike Weeks and his wife are fitness junkies. During quarantine, they tried home workouts—push-ups, planks, bike riding around town—but it wasn't the same. The semi-retired oil and gas explorer longed for his old

gym routine. "To say I missed it immensely is an understatement."

So on May 8, the first day that Life Time gym reopened, the Oklahoma City resident was right there, though "slightly apprehensive."

"I'm 66 years old," he says, and "purportedly in the high-risk category."

For Weeks, the benefits ultimately outweighed the risks. But as the country reopens, even the most dedicated gym rats are concerned about returning to a seemingly healthy habit during a pandemic—and doing it in a place known for sweat, germs and hard-to-clean equipment.

Big-box gyms and local fitness studios are reopening under a patchwork of protocols based on state and local guidance, but most are following these basics: spacing out cardio machines, touchless entry, [smaller class sizes](#), increased cleaning and requiring users to clean all equipment before and after each use.

Mindbody, an online booking platform for fitness classes, salons and wellness appointments, reported all bookings down 70% compared to last year but says they have picked up as states lift restrictions. Florida bookings were up 99% week over week, Texas jumped 94% and Georgia is up 48%.

New Horizon Athletics in Jamestown, Tennessee is not allowing new members since it had to limit [class sizes](#) for social distancing. At Body Renew Alaska in South Anchorage, workout-goers have to reserve a 45 minute time slot; only 40 are allowed per slot, and the gym closes at 45 minutes past every hour for a 15-minute deep clean.

CycleBar in Fort Lauderdale, Florida installed a pricey HVAC system and cut class sizes in half, but the pent-up demand has been so overwhelming that they had to add classes for Tuesday's reopening.

At Urban Body Fitness in Atlanta, gymgoers get a touchless thermometer check and their own disinfectant bottle along with a stern warning to clean equipment before and after use. Only 30 are allowed at a time in the 14,000 square-foot gym, which is frequented by employees from the nearby Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Owner Rad Slough had plenty of diehards desperate to return—and a slew of members who canceled.

"Some of them are just really scared, and some of them have lost their jobs. The bulk of them are just still freaked out and not coming back for awhile," said Slough, who also had a recent influx of new members because the big-box gym down the street still hasn't reopened.

Slough warns that those who don't follow protocol will have their membership revoked. Experts, though, say there's a lack of uniform standards and enforcement across the fitness industry.

"I'm still very concerned," said Dr. Kristin Englund, an infectious diseases expert at the Cleveland Clinic. "If they're not wearing a mask or wiping down the equipment, what is the ability to enforce that or not allow them to come back?"

Most experts agree: For the majority of healthy Americans under 65, the physical and mental benefits of working out outweigh the risks. And there are always risks.

"Everyone will have to keep in mind that the world we're trying to get back to is going to carry risk," said Dr. Deverick Anderson, director of the Duke Center for Antimicrobial Stewardship and Infection Prevention. "I think responsibility is on both sides of that coin. Don't just rely on your gym to do everything. You've got to play a part in this process as well."

Spots at fitness classes will likely be harder to come by because of reduced capacity. Many will likely require reservations, making it more difficult to squeeze in last-minute workouts. And after months of being shuttered, many small studios across the United States will struggle to reopen at all.

Kelli McMullen's yoga studio in Brighton, Michigan went from generating about \$40,000 a month before the pandemic to \$1,000 from donations. Most members of her 23-person staff are teaching online classes for free. The Space will likely be closed for three more months. When it reopens, capacity will be reduced by two-thirds and it'll likely close for an hour in between sessions for deep cleaning.

"If it's much longer than June, I can't keep going into my personal funds," McMullen says, "so we're going to have to have people pay for online classes."

Aaron Fowler brought along a mask when he returned to his interval training class at CITYROW last weekend but quickly discarded it, finding it too difficult to breathe. He also wore gloves and used his own hand towel. The rowers were much further apart, and the class was capped at only seven participants.

"Just to be able to work out for an hour to kind of relieve some of that stress was pretty key for me," said Fowler, 35, who oversees transportation at an Atlanta university. He signed up for the next class, but will assess the risk day by day. He expects the virus threat to last a year.

"And," he says, "I don't know if i can go that long without it."

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