



Choosing a Treadmill

You have just decided a good electric treadmill is exactly what you need to maintain your commitment to regular aerobic exercise. But you find there are dozens of different treadmills, ranging in price from \$399 to over \$3,000. What accounts for the huge difference in price? What do you look for when buying?

Don't Leave Home . . .

First, before going anywhere, decide where you will put your new treadmill—and measure the space. You'll need some free space around the machine itself—and some head room if you're going to get a machine that inclines.

Second, dress in loose, comfortable clothing and workout shoes. You'll want to try out several machines before you buy. Finally, head off to a specialty fitness retail store.

Construction

The deciding factor in the life of a treadmill is the motor. If you want your treadmill to last, look for the larger, heavier motors. "Horsepower" is applied to two different ratings—"peak duty rating" and "continuous duty rating." The peak duty rating is advertised on the treadmill tag. The continuous duty rating is stamped directly on the motor and is the rating that determines its quality and duration. In general, the larger and heavier the motor is, the cooler it will run and the longer it will last. *Penn State Sports Medicine Newsletter* recommends purchasing a machine with at least 1.5 continuous duty horsepower—higher if you weigh more than 185 pounds or plan to run on the treadmill. (Be sure to check the voltage. Some commercial treadmills are 220, which won't work in most homes.)

The thickness of the walking deck and the size of the walking track should also be high on your list of priorities. The thickness of the deck affects the comfort of the legs and feet with prolonged use. Choose a treadmill that has a deck thickness of at least $\frac{3}{4}$ inch, or one inch if you plan to both walk and jog.

The walking track needs enough length (at least 48 inches) and width (at least 17 inches) for you to walk comfortably without stepping off the track. If you intend to run on your new treadmill, you may want a longer track. Test it while you are in the store.

The "buzz" feature these days is definitely shock absorption. To provide effective cushioning for the legs, feet and back, the treadmill's suspension must be directly under the walking deck. (Some treadmills may have "shock absorbers" on the legs of the treadmill so you can see the frame bounce while you are walking. This is not effective shock absorption!) The padding can be made of foam or rubber. Foam is softer and more compressible than rubber, but requires more time to return to its original thickness after impact. Rubber instantly recovers to full thickness and is better able to maintain its energy absorption level. Again, test the machine yourself.

"Perks"

After you've checked the physical construction, look at the electronic board. Here's where you can economize, if necessary. The less expensive treadmills have the basics: speed, distance, incline, time and calories. The more expensive treadmills also have a range of special preset exercise programs that automatically alter speed and incline, varying high-intensity effort with lower-intensity effort. Some treadmills even measure your heart rate! But

will electronic programs and feedback motivate you to keep exercising? If not, and/or you're on a limited budget, you can buy a less expensive machine and a separate heart rate monitor, and develop your own programs.

Service and Warranties

Ask the dealer about delivery and setup. Sometimes this is included in the price—but not always. Also, check out the service and warranty policies.

The minimum warranty on a fairly good treadmill is 90 days parts and service. The better treadmills will carry a three-year warranty on the motor and two years on the drive train. As for who will be responsible for servicing a treadmill when it has problems—that's the store you purchased it from. So if the store offers a good guarantee, chances are the machine won't need servicing very often!

If you choose a quality electric treadmill, it will last for years and provide great versatility for your cardiovascular program. ●

Kay Cross, MEd, CSCS, started Body By Kay personal training in 1988 in Ft. Worth, Texas. She trains clients and is a business consultant for other trainers. For information on training or workshops, call or fax her at (817) 577-9494.

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Kimberly A. Searl
www.mindbodybalance.com
 By Appointment Only

Phone: 734 - 241 - 7457
 Fax: 734 - 241 - 7457
kim@mindbodybalance.com