

Information Package on

AIMFREE

Accessibility Instruments Measuring
Fitness and Recreation Environments

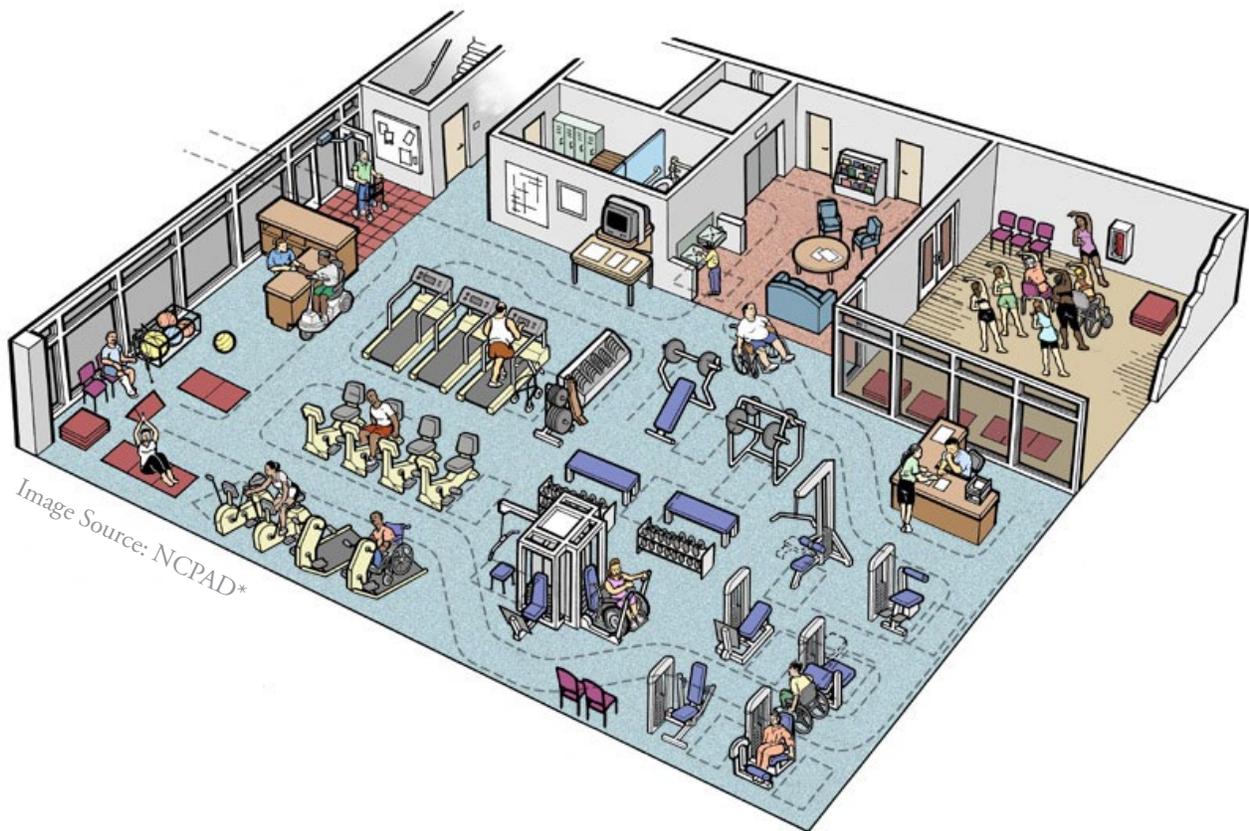
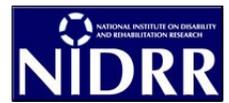


Image Source: NCPAD*



KT4TT Intervention Tools - Series B:5 (2011)

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You probably already know that regular exercise can reduce your risk of heart disease, high blood pressure, stroke, breast and colon cancer, and type 2 diabetes. Not only can regular exercise help to avoid serious health conditions, it can also help decrease or eliminate pain and depression, **increase endurance and stamina**, and help you to sleep better at night, making you **feel more energized** and giving you a better quality of life. These benefits apply to EVERYONE, young, old, and people with disabilities.



In fact, people with disabilities may **benefit even more** from regular exercise than people without disabilities because it can lower their chances of developing secondary health conditions that are related to their primary disability, such as pressure ulcers or urinary tract infections occurring in a person with a spinal cord injury.

However, you probably are also aware of the frustrations and barriers someone with disabilities may encounter when attempting to use a gym or fitness facility. Perhaps you have joined a gym in the past which was not fully accessible but thought you could make due. However, after weeks or months of continual dissatisfaction with the facility, the staff, the programs and/or services you decided to stop going.

You are not the only one!



Unfortunately, a larger percentage of people with disabilities compared to those without disabilities are not partaking in regular exercise. But wait, don't get too discouraged yet, **read on** to find out why and how a new accessibility survey called **AIMFREE** can help you get back to your happy and healthy self.

Gym Accessibility

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Service's Healthy People 2010 report¹, 56% of people with disabilities reported having NO leisure time physical activity, while only 36% of people without disabilities reported the same thing.

So why are people with disabilities not participating in regular exercise? The Healthy People 2010 report suggests people with disabilities may not be exercising partially because of environmental or architectural barriers, fitness center policies and practices, discrimination and social attitudes. For example, it may be difficult for some people with mobility limitations to move around a gym or fitness center because the equipment is positioned too close together, not allowing a wheelchair to travel between them. Or perhaps the gym staff or members are not inviting or accepting of people with disabilities, making that person feel not welcomed.

1. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Healthy People 2010. Conference edition-volume II. Washington, D.C. 2000.

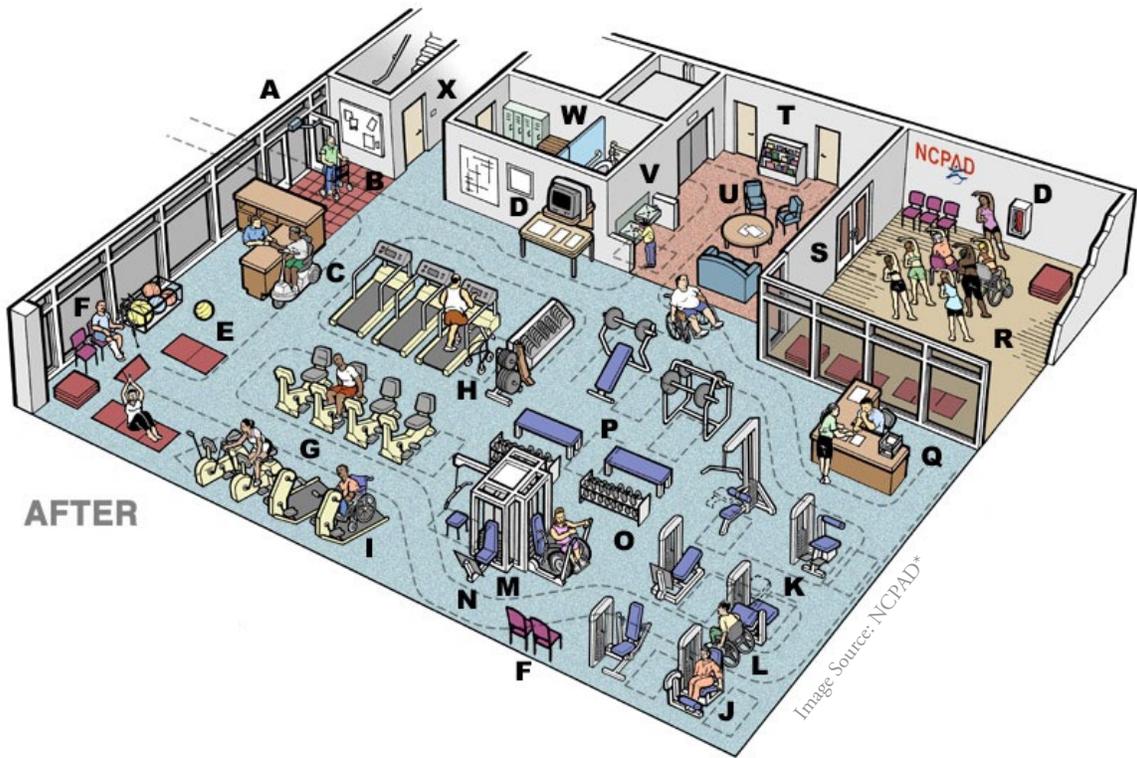
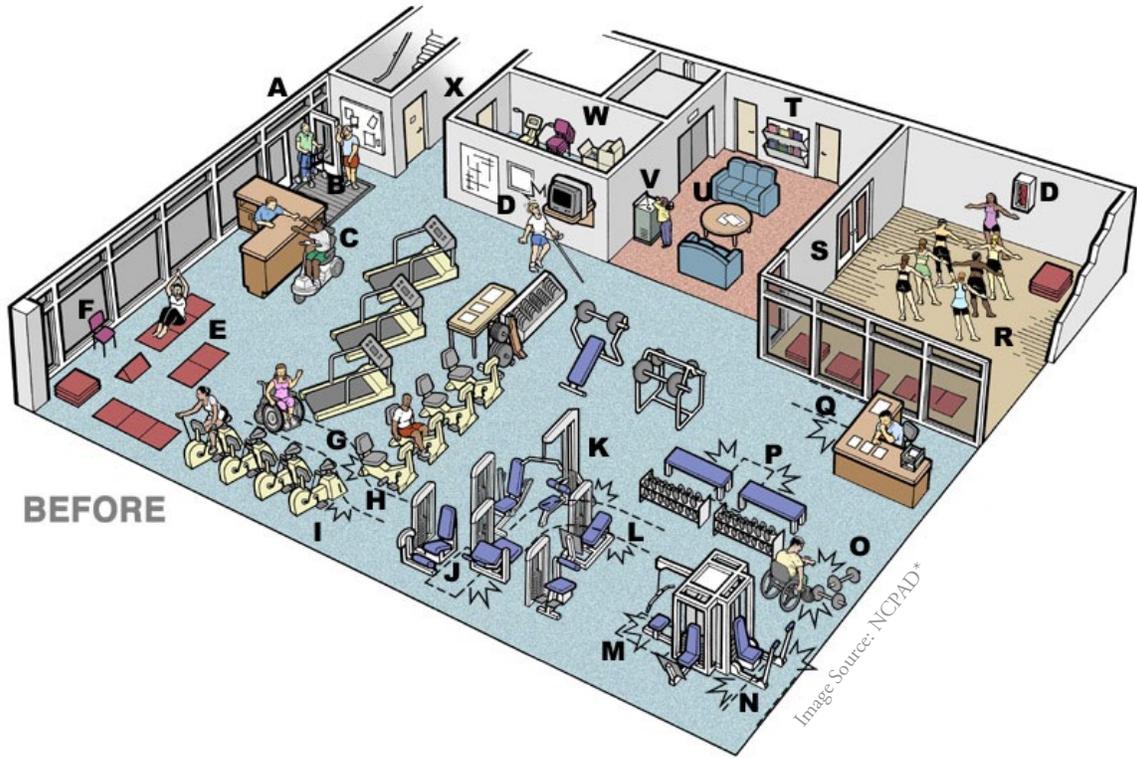
In fact, many fitness centers, health clubs, and gyms are indeed **NOT** fully accessible for people with disabilities, specifically with mobility or vision limitations.

Often times gym owners and managers simply do not know that their gym is not accessible. In other cases managers may think the only way to make it accessible is with costly renovations. In some cases renovations are required, but in many other cases, very small, low cost changes can improve a gym's accessibility.

The Americans with Disabilities Act requires gyms and fitness centers to have certain accessible features, like accessible parking, entrances, restrooms, paths of travel, etc. However there are many other elements of a gym which are not covered under the ADA but are extremely important to creating a truly accessible environment. Accommodating programs, policies, staff members and accessible equipment are just a few of the elements not covered by the ADA. If a gym just follows the ADA requirements, it will not prove satisfactory to a significant subset of the population. The more accommodating a gym is the greater it's potential for increasing it's membership or retaining those members who are aging or have become injured.

There are many different factors to consider when deciding if a gym or fitness center is accessible above and beyond what the ADA recommends, some of which include, equipment controls and adjustments, height of reception desk, exercise programs, and much more. The next page shows two picture examples, one is of a fitness facility that is not accessible and the other is a picture of the same facility which has been modified to be fully accessible. Can you spot the differences?





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Just a few of the changes made to this gym, after completing the AIMFREE survey include:

- In the instance at letter R, program adaptation has been provided for individuals who have varying levels of abilities to form an inclusive environment. How policies, procedures, and programs are offered and executed will affect access too.
- Creating an accessible unisex toilet/family changing room at letter W to meet needs that were lacking in the men or women locker room.
- Replaced or modified the multi-station exercise machine so that seats can be removed or adapted to allow a person in a wheelchair or scooter to pull up underneath and use the equipment at letter M. Freestanding stools/chairs that are portable or seats that flip up or swing out of the way are good options.
- Secured loose mats or install a new permanent floor surface to alleviate tripping hazards at letter B, particularly for those who walk with a mobility or balance disability.

As you can see from the before and after pictures, there are many different elements within a gym that can deny access to a person with disabilities. So many that it may be difficult to spot all the barriers with a quick tour of the facility. So how do you know if the gym or fitness center you are interested in attending is fully accessible? If you call and speak with the gym manager, chances are he or she may not know if their gym is accessible, or may incorrectly think it is, when it is not.

In these instances, you need to inform the gym manager exactly what you would need changed to make their gym more accommodating for you. This may be a difficult task because you may not know where to start, or feel like you have no “evidence” of your claims. This is when you would turn to AIMFREE

(Accessibility Instruments Measuring Fitness and Recreation EnvironmEnts) for help.

AIMFREE

What is it? - AIMFREE is a survey containing several questions about various elements of fitness and recreation facilities (the facility’s environment, equipment, programs, policies, training and staff behavior). Its’ purpose is to measure the **total** accessibility of fitness or recreational areas for persons with mobility or sensory impairments. Dr. James Rimmer from the University of Illinois, has produced and tested the validity and reliability of the AIMFREE questionnaire.

Dr. Rimmer and his staff recognize the need to improve the accessibility of gyms and fitness centers around the country and believe the first step to making these improvements is to understand and highlight the areas of concern within these facilities. Fitness facilities looking to create a total accessible environment need to evaluate the facility to see what areas are acceptable and what needs to be improved. This is the purpose of AIMFREE, to evaluate the complete environment of a fitness center through measurements and objective questions, ultimately to create an atmosphere in which everyone can benefit and enjoy.

AIMFREE evaluates a gym’s compliance with accessibility guidelines and therefore asks many questions which require the gym manager or owner to take many different measurements throughout their facility. This is an objective survey where two people who use AIMFREE on the same gym should get the same results of that gym. One benefit to AIMFREE is that the survey comes with detailed instructions on how to conduct the survey.

But the *real value* in completing the AIMFREE survey is the actionable feedback the gym manager or owner can receive from Dr. Rimmer and his staff. The gym manager has the option to send the completed AIMFREE survey to Dr. Rimmer who will review the answers and provide practical ideas and suggestions to the gym manager and owner on how to improve their facility's accessibility.

How was it made? - In order to get a complete understanding of what the concerns were, and to develop good questions, Dr. Rimmer held discussion groups across 10 regions in the US. Four groups were held in each of the 10 regions which consisted of people with disabilities, fitness professionals, architects, and city planners. The discussion was geared towards identifying the barriers relating to the use of fitness centers and gyms by people with disabilities.

Topics such as motivation, transportation issues, equipment access, participation in programs, skills and attitudes of fitness professionals and other issues were discussed among these groups. Concerns which were discovered during the discussions as well as information from the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Accessibility Guidelines were used to develop the questions found in AIMFREE.

Consequently, AIMFREE goes above and beyond what the ADA requires by including questions pertaining to additional areas such as fitness programs, services, equipment, and staff behaviors and policies. Table 1. depicts the different elements of a gym acknowledged by the ADA guidelines and the AIMFREE survey.

Table 1: Included Gym Elements for Accessibility Considerations	ADA	AIMFREE
Accessible Parking	✓	✓
Entrances	✓	✓
Paths of Travel	✓	✓
Restrooms	✓	✓
Exercise Equipment		✓
Exercise Programs & Services		✓
Professional Training		✓
Facility Policies		✓
Staff Behavior		✓

How can I use AIMFREE?

People with disabilities can use AIMFREE as a tool to advocate for equal access to the gym of their choice. Attached on the front of the folder and inside on the pocket of this information packet is a simple card briefly describing the benefits of AIMFREE and where to find it. Please feel free to give these cards to the gym managers of your choice and ask him or her to seriously consider completing the survey in order to improve the accessibility of their gym. Explain to him/her that they could increase their current customers' satisfaction as well as bring in new members by using AIMFREE, obtaining Dr. Rimmer's suggestions and following through on those suggestions.

Also enclosed in this information packet is a CD with an electronic copy of the AIMFREE survey. This copy is for you to review so that you are familiar with the survey. Please do not share this copy with your gym manager because it is copyrighted. The gym manager can contact the project administrator, Sue Arnold, directly who will provide further instructions on how to access the survey and obtain feedback.

Example questions –

Table 2. provides an example of how AIMFREE goes above and beyond the U. S. Access Board’s guidelines for an accessible facility, which primarily only involves the built environment. AIMFREE includes other factors related to a satisfactory experience within a gym. These factors include accessibility of equipment, information, programs, policies, professional behavior, professional support and training.

Table 2: Fitness-center specific measures of accessibility	
Equipment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does the facility provide exercise equipment that does not require transfer from wheelchair to machine? Are buttons on equipment raised from the panel surface?
Fitness program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can individuals with disabilities participate in fitness/recreation programs at their own pace? Do exercise classes and programs (e.g., aerobics classes) include activities that can be performed from a seated position?
Hot tubs /saunas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there a ramp leading into the whirlpool or hot tub? Is there a place to park a wheelchair outside the sauna so it doesn’t get hot?
Locker rooms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there a clear path leading from the locker room entrance to the lockers that is at least 36 inches wide? Can the highest lockers be opened from a seated position?
Policies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the accessibility of the facility periodically reviewed? Can a consumer’s personal assistant be allowed to enter the facility without incurring additional charges?
Professional behavior	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did the staff member make eye contact when speaking to consumers? Did staff members ask consumers if they needed assistance before attempting to help them?
Professional knowledge /attitudes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did you feel that staff members were uneasy with regard to consumers’ disability? Did you feel that staff members maintained a positive attitude when interacting with consumers?
Professional support and training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do staff members receive training on providing accommodations to persons with disabilities? Do staff members receive basic information on medications and their effect during exercise?
Swimming pool	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are pool lift controls accessible from the deck level? Does the pool have a ledge to hold onto when entering the water?

Where can I find out more about AIMFREE?

The person to contact with any questions pertaining to AIMFREE is:

Sue Arnold

Project Administrator

E-mail: smarnold@buffalo.edu

Phone: 1-716-204-8606

Address: KT4TT Center

University at Buffalo

100 Sylvan Parkway,

Suite 400

Amherst, NY 14228

In Summary...

Who doesn't want to feel their best, not be tired all the time, have energy and confidence to get things done, and to be **HEALTHY!** It is possible, and AIMFREE can help you get started by advocating for improvements to be made to the gym you would like to attend. Urge that gym owner or manager to try out AIMFREE, they may be surprised how little needs to be done in order to make their facility more comfortable for you or others like you. Go on, get excited, make that change today!