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Your Guide to a Good Buy

by Michele Bender

Research shows getting fit at home is a great way to stick with your workouts. But buying a bike, treadmill, or elliptical machine can mean a cost so big it needs a comma. To make sure you get what you really want, use our checklist from Steven Loy, PhD, professor of kinesiology at California State University, Northridge, and product evaluator for the American Council on Exercise.

Shop in workout gear. Spend 5 to 10 minutes on the equipment at the store so you can see what a home workout would be like. And notice the noise: In a small room those hums and beeps may drive you nuts.

Get nitpicky with the parts. Give the equipment a thorough once-over. Here's what to look for:

Treadmill: The belt should have at least two layers and be a minimum of 17 inches wide and 49 inches long; the motor's horsepower should be at least 2.

Elliptical trainer: Arm handles should be easy to hold and have smooth (not jerky) motions; pedals should be wide, not narrow. Also, make sure the room you're going to put the elliptical in can accommodate the machine's full range of motion.

Bike: The seat, handlebars, and pedals should all feel comfortable. Also, the pedals and flywheel should move smoothly.

Consider how you'll use the equipment. Planning to walk on your treadmill a few times a week, for example? A \$400 to \$1,800 model will probably be sufficient. For running several miles daily, though, you're going to need a durable, \$2,000 to \$7,000 model. (See Health.com/bestof2007 for our favorites.)

Beware bells and whistles. You could pay hundreds of dollars more for extras. If you don't care about things like having multiple programs to choose from, don't get them.

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